

A Friend of Mine or a Friend of Ours?



An Essay On Vouching

Vouching means different things to different anarchists. For some, to vouch for a person means the vouchee is felt to be trustworthy and competent enough for an action. For others, vouching means that the voucher has concrete evidence of the trustworthiness and competence of the vouchee, and is willing to stake their reputation on that evidence.

To agree on whether to vouch for someone or not, we need to be clear about what we mean by vouching. We propose three components of a vouch that might be helpful in discussing that meaning: trustworthiness, competence, and the voucher's reputation.

Trustworthiness refers to whether or not the vouchee has or will intentionally or unintentionally assist law enforcement. This includes that the vouchee is not currently, and has never been, a law enforcement agent or worked for law enforcement as an infiltrator, that the vouchee has never been a confidential informant and is not currently one, that the vouchee will not intentionally or unintentionally reveal information to those not involved in the action, and that the vouchee will not cooperate with any investigation in the future, even if facing prison time.

Competence refers to whether the vouchee is mentally and physically capable of doing the proposed action, including not abandoning the action before it starts, not

having a panic attack during the action, and not becoming physically incapacitated during the action.

Reputation refers to the consequence of giving a bad vouch. Depending on the severity of the violation, and risk of the action, the reputational consequences could range from not taking the voucher seriously in the future, to not doing actions with the voucher or vouchee ever again, to retribution against the voucher and the vouchee for deception or gross incompetence.

Below we give additional detail on the strength of evidence that can be used to assess the trustworthiness and competence of a vouchee, along with a short discussion of the voucher's reputation, and the consequences of a bad vouch.

Trustworthiness

If someone is going to believe that a person you vouch for is trustworthy, it's worth considering what evidence might be brought forth to support your case. As the consequences for getting caught increase, so should the required strength of evidence for trustworthiness of a vouch.

Some suggestions for evidence of trustworthiness of the vouchee, in order of strength:

-From talking to this person, do you get the feeling that they are genuine in their attitudes and convictions?

Talk is cheap, but one can often get a feeling from people about whether they care about what they're talking about. Reading Kropotkin, Stirner, the Invisible Committee, or Blessed is the Flame are not things that normal people enjoy, including law enforcement. Does this person seem, from their words, to be passionate about something? Does this person have a basic sense of security culture? Does this person propose activities, including illegal ones, that are appropriate for the relationship? Does this person talk about their criminal activities, and the activities of others, openly in a way that is inappropriate for the relationship?

-Has this person done actions on their own, without the prompting of others?

While the need-to-know principle would ideally exclude awareness of the criminal activities of others, sometimes two and two can be put together. When people take action without needing you or others to participate, this is an indication that their feelings are genuine, and if that action is destructive, then they are unlikely to be an infiltrator. However, although committing crimes is frowned upon by law enforcement agencies, undercover agents and infiltrators can get away with committing crimes, even if initiated on their own and done by themselves.

-Has this person participated in actions with you, and kept their mouth shut to people who are not in law enforcement?

A common mistake is getting excited about actions and their results, particularly when that action makes headlines, and bragging about the action to others. A strong vouch means that the vouchee has consistently kept discussions of their illegal activities to themselves, particularly when they had the opportunity to brag about something but decided against it.

-Have you done actions with this person where, if the person were a snitch, one would already know about it?

Their participation in the action, and knowledge of who is involved in the action, is enough for serious convictions, yet nobody has ever been charged. This is a pretty strong indicator that the person is not currently an infiltrator or confidential informant, unless they are waiting to gain more information, for example to network map, or hoping to get more severe charges. A vouchee who has engaged in riskier actions, such as felonies, in many different contexts, over an extended period of time, where no information is leaked to law enforcement or anyone outside the action group, is an indicator of trustworthiness.

-Has this person kept their mouth shut, even when facing severe consequences?

As we've learned from many examples, such as the Green Scare and Standing Rock, many hardcore anarchists say they will never snitch, and do not snitch when things are going well. However, when they get caught, and are facing many years in prison, things change. The strongest test of the trustworthiness of a comrade is knowing that they have had the opportunities for leniency, in the form of cooperating plea deals, but decided not to cooperate, and instead endured the punishment, sometimes meaning a longer prison sentence. Contrast Daniel McGowen versus Jake Ferguson, or Jessica Reznicek versus Ruby Montoya.

Even here, trustworthiness is not guaranteed. A person who has done time, who has always kept their mouth shut, may face a new prison sentence that is beyond their threshold for endurance. Life Sentence has examples from Sandtown Baltimore of gang members in the drug game who, when facing the threat of going back to prison, decided to snitch. There's no sure thing when it comes to vouching.

Taking these all into account, the strongest vouch, in terms of trustworthiness, would be for a person who:

1. In conversations seems to have genuine attitudes and convictions for doing the action.
2. Has done actions on their own or with other groups without your prompting.
3. Has consistently done actions where it would be socially beneficial to brag about participating, but has not done so.
4. Has done actions with others that are severe enough to get people thrown in prison for a long time, but nothing has come of it.
5. Has served time in jail or prison instead of taking a cooperating plea deal which could lighten their sentence.

Competence

It has been our experience that vouchers tend to almost entirely overlook the competence of the vouchee to complete the action. While it's great that you like someone and trust them, their participation in an action is highly inappropriate if they are not capable of carrying it out.

For this reason, competence matches trustworthiness in its importance to a vouch. We propose that, with respect to vouching, competence has two components: mental and physical.

Mental competence indicates that the person has mental capability to do what is required for the action, including any special skills, knowledge, charisma, or other non-physical attributes required, but often more importantly, that they have the mental fortitude to stay focused and not panic under pressure. Someone who cannot focus, cannot remember their tasks, or misrepresents their ability to do parts of the action, should not be seen as competent for that action.

Physical competence means that the person can physically do the action. If the action involves running, the person is capable of running (note that almost all actions require running implicitly because of the risk of police chase). If the action requires jumping, the person can jump. If the action requires bicycling, climbing, swimming, repelling,

hiking long distances, carrying heavy packs, the person is capable of doing these things.

Just as with trustworthiness, a vouch of competence is weakest when the person says that they will be capable, and strongest when the person has a proven track record of effectively doing the types of things that need to be done for the action.

Some suggestions for evidence of mental competence, in order of increasing strength:

-Does the vouchee say that they know how to do what is required for the action?

Talk is cheap, but one would expect that the voucher at least communicate with the vouchee well enough to help them understand what needs to be done for the action, and the vouchee at least verbally confirms that they believe they are capable of what is required.

-Has the vouchee demonstrated knowledge, during conversations, about how to complete the activities of the action?

It is often possible to understand whether someone has the mental competence to do an action by discussing the action with them. If the action involves tree climbing, for example, if the person cannot explain how to construct a

Figure 8 knot, then they probably do not have the required competence.

-Has the vouchee demonstrated, in conversation, that they can remember their part of the action plan and think through what they need to do carefully?

If the vouchee cannot remember anything, cannot stay focused in conversation, and cannot see the obvious implications of what they need to do, such as thinking of bringing gloves if there is gear that needs to be used that might leave fingerprints, then they are unlikely to have the mental competence to stay focused during the action.

-Has the vouchee demonstrated, in conversation, that they are able to think through the entire action plan carefully enough to see its strengths and weaknesses, and propose ways of dealing with those weaknesses?

Thinking through the overall plan, finding flaws, and fixing those flaws to the greatest degree possible, indicates that this person understands what the action is about, can remember the relevant information and remain focused when thinking about the action, and may be capable of making needed adjustments if things go wrong. Someone who can't think through the plan is unlikely to be able to make effective changes to that plan when necessary.

-Has the vouchee demonstrated that they have the skillset required for the action in a non-action context?

Going back to the example of tying a Figure 8 knot, if the person can demonstrate, in a non-action context without the help of anyone else, that they can reliably tie a Figure 8 knot, then this is a good indicator that they know how to do what they say. This does not mean, however, that under pressure, with adrenaline pumping, that they can tie a Figure 8 knot.

-Has the vouchee demonstrated that they have the skillset required for the action in an action context?

Communicating using radios to evade police is a skill. If the voucher has personal experience that the vouchee is capable of this type of evasion, from prior actions, then this is a good indicator that the vouchee will be able to do this again. Evidence that the vouchee can do the task under real pressure during a real action is very different from demonstrating that knowledge in a low stakes scenario.

-Has the vouchee demonstrated, in multiple high risk action contexts, that they have the required skills to do the action, and can draw on those skills under pressure?

Over and over again, the vouchee has been able to do what is needed under pressure. The vouchee rarely makes mistakes, and when they make mistakes, is able to compensate for them.

-Has the vouchee demonstrated, in multiple high risk action contexts, that they can stay calm and focused, even when things go wrong, and come up with solutions to problems on the fly?

Effectively dealing with problems during a high risk action is the best test of the mental competence of the vouchee. This requires bringing forth background knowledge and knowledge of the action plan, knowledge of the enemy and their tactics, as well as staying calm and focused enough to turn that knowledge into a new plan.

Just as with mental competence, the weakest evidence of physical competence comes from conversation or casual observation, while the strongest evidence comes from direct experience with the person in high risk contexts. When the adrenaline hits because one is in imminent danger of arrest or injury, knees can go weak, people suddenly need to urinate or shit, someone might pass out or have an asthma attack or a heart problem. The best evidence comes from seeing that the vouchee can handle their physical condition during intense high risk scenarios.

Summarizing, the strongest vouch, in terms of mental and physical competence, would be for a vouchee who:

1. Says that they can do the action, both mentally and physically.
2. Demonstrates in conversation that they can do what is required for the action.
3. Demonstrates that they can plan and think through their part of the action.
4. Can think through the entire action plan and analyze its strengths and weaknesses.
5. Demonstrates that they have the skillsets and physical capabilities in a non-action context.
6. Demonstrates that they have the skillsets and physical capabilities in an action context.
7. Demonstrates, in multiple high risk action contexts, that they have the skills and physical capabilities required to do the action, even under pressure and when problems arise.

Reputation

A bad vouch for a small low risk action is usually not a big deal. We have conversations about what went wrong, and try to get our understanding to align. However, vouching for someone who snitches, or can't keep their mouth shut, or who can't do the action at all because of some mental or physical issue, is a major problem. While snitching is obviously the worst outcome of a vouch, talking too much or panicking and becoming a liability to the action group are also extremely difficult to deal with. Anyone making a vouch should know that their reputation depends on their vouching, and that the actions of the vouchee will reflect on the reputation of the voucher. The point is not to make people nervous and calculating about their vouches, nor is it to create a punitive social hierarchy, but instead to get people to take seriously what they are saying when they vouch for someone.

Forgiveness and Cutting Ties

People make mistakes in their actions, their words, and their vouches. In most circumstances, it is worth having a discussion and forgiving minor issues. Even highly experienced anarchists can panic and make mistakes. Usually problems with competence arise, and these often can be forgiven.

But problems with trustworthiness are usually much more severe. Having an incompetent comrade usually does not indicate ill intent, but often incomplete knowledge.

Having an untrustworthy comrade sometimes comes accidentally, for example the common accident of blurting out someone's government name, and doing a poor job covering it up. But snitching and talking to people outside the action group about the action aren't accidents, they are choices that deserve very little, if any, forgiveness. It's important to consider that if you vouch for someone who is untrustworthy, and continue to associate with them, then you will be considered untrustworthy.

If we do not cut ties with people who intentionally harm us, then all of us are vulnerable.

If we do not take risks with others, then we do not have the opportunity for anything great to happen.

