

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN BEHAVIOR

Technical Report Number 5

THE EFFECTS OF THE PRESTIGE OF THE SPEAKER AND ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF OPPOSING
ARGUMENTS ON AUDIENCE RETENTION AND SHIFT OF OPINION*

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A study by Haiman has shown that "variations in the prestige of the speaker

Haiman, Franklin S. "An Experimental Study of the Effects of Ethos in Public Speaking," SM, XVI (1949), No. 2, pp. 190-203.

produced by varying the chairman's introductory identification of him, were found to influence significantly the effectiveness of a persuasive speech in behalf of national compulsory health insurance--as shown by audience shift-of-opinion ballots in a classroom situation."

A study of the effectiveness of the "both sides" presentation was carried out in the Army and reported by Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield. They found that a "both sides" presentation was more effective than a "one side" presentation in securing shifts of opinion for those who were initially opposed to the speaker's point of view and for those who had a high school education or more; the "one side" presentation was more effective for those who were already favorable and for those who had not graduated from high school.

Hovland, C. I., Lumsdaine, A. A., and Sheffield, F. D., Experiments in Mass Communication, Vol. III, (Princeton, N. J., 1949); pp. 201-227.

This study sought to confirm the effects of the speaker's prestige and the "both sides" presentation in terms of shift of opinion. In addition, another criterion of effectiveness was here employed -- retention. Finally, through subgroup analysis of the audience, the writer sought to establish whether the effectiveness of the speaker's prestige or the "both sides" presentation might be related to the sex, intelligence, amount of education, or initial attitudes of the listeners.

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PROCEDURE

College students filled out a Woodward Shift-of-Opinion ballot on which they indicated whether they were in favor of, undecided, or against lowering the voting age to eighteen. Approximately one-half of the students heard a recorded speech favoring lowering the voting age by a speaker introduced as a sophomore at the University of Minnesota. The other one-half of the students heard the same recorded speech, but in this case, the speaker was introduced as a Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, the author of a book on voting habits of the American people, and a past president of the American Political Science Association.

Approximately one-half of those who listened to the "student" and one-half of those who listened to the "professor" heard a speech which gave only arguments and evidence advocating lowering the voting age to eighteen -- the "one side" speech. The other one-half of those who listened to the "student" and those who listened to the "professor" heard a speech which briefly mentioned the leading arguments against lowering the voting age as well as those favoring it -- the "both sides" speech. The arguments and evidence favoring the lowering of the voting age were the same in the "one side" and "both sides" speeches.

After each group had heard one of the types of presentation, they filled out the Shift-of-Opinion Ballot indicating whether or not their attitude on lowering the voting age had changed. They then took a fifty-item multiple choice retention test on the material that was common to the "one side" and "both sides" speeches.

The subjects used in this study were students enrolled in the Fundamentals of Speech and the Communication courses in the College of Science, Literature and the Arts at the University of Minnesota during the winter and spring quarters of 1951-52. The total group included 579 men and 399 women.

The speeches were organized in the following manner. At the beginning the speaker pointed out the importance of the issue and then said, "I shall review the main arguments on the question and then state my own position." In the "one side" speech he went on to give three main arguments supported by evidence including examples, studies, authority, historical precedent, all of which favored lowering the voting age to eighteen. This same material was included in the "both sides" speech but, in addition, the leading arguments against lowering the voting age were here briefly mentioned. These opposing arguments were inserted in a specific pattern. A favorable argument was given first, then an opposing argument, then another favorable argument, etc. A favorable argument was supported in each case with evidence whereas the opposing argument was merely stated. The opposing arguments were not refuted but were simply followed by another favorable argument; if the opposing argument seemed rather strong, it was followed by an uncontroversial favorable argument and evidence which were considered very strong. The opposing arguments were mentioned in the early part of the speech so that the material presented in the latter half was all favorable to lowering the voting age. The "one side" speech was approximately thirteen minutes long and the "both sides" speech sixteen minutes in length.

RESULTS

Table I shows the percentage of shift of opinion for those who heard the speech in which the speaker was introduced as a sophomore at the University of Minnesota and for those who heard the same speech but with the speaker introduced as a Professor of Political Science from the University of Chicago. A significantly higher percentage of men who heard the "professor" shifted their opinions in the direction advocated by the speaker than did those who heard the "student".

When these groups were analyzed as to initial attitude on the subject, the largest difference in percentage of shift of opinion was found among those who were initially favorable to the speaker's point of view. Among the men who were initially favorable, there were twice as many shifts for those who heard the "professor" as for those who heard the "student". When the listeners were analyzed in terms of class in college, it was found that the prestige of the "professor" was more effective in securing shifts among men in the upper classes than among the men in the freshmen class.

Table II compares the "student" and the "professor" in terms of retention. No statistically significant differences appeared for men or women or for any of the sub-groups.

Table III shows the percentage of listeners shifted in the direction intended by the speaker for the "one side" speech and the "both sides" speech. It will be noted that no significant differences appeared for men or women. Furthermore, there were no significant differences for any of the other sub-divisions of the data: initial attitude, A.C.E. scores, year in college.

TABLE I

THE PERCENTAGE OF SHIFT OF OPINION FOR THE "STUDENT" AND THE "PROFESSOR"

	"Student"			"Professor"			Diff.	S.E.	C.R.
	N	Shift- ed	Percen- tage	N	Shift- ed	Percen- tage			
Men	286	90	31.5	293	130	44.4	12.9	4.13	3.12**
Women	199	104	52.3	200	93	46.5	- 5.8	5.00	1.16
Total	485	194	40.0	493	223	45.2	5.2	3.16	1.65

** Significant above the 1% level.

TABLE II

RETENTION SCORES FOR THOSE LISTENING TO THE "STUDENT" AND THE "PROFESSOR"

	"Student"			"Professor"			Diff.	S.F.	C.R.
	N	Total Score	Mean	N	Total Score	Mean			
Men	286	10290	35.98	293	10319	35.22	-.76	.401	1.90
Women	199	6621	33.27	200	6753	33.76	.49	.566	.87
Total	485	16911	34.87	493	17072	34.65	-.24	.315	.76

TABLE III

THE PERCENTAGE OF SHIFT OF OPINION FOR THE "ONE SIDE" AND "BOTH SIDES" SPEECHES

	"ONE SIDE" SPEECH			"BOTH SIDES" SPEECH			Diff.	S.E.	C.R.
	N	Shift- ed	Percen- tage	N	Shift- ed	Percen- tage			
Men	283	115	40.64	296	116	38.85	-1.79	4.07	.44
Women	206	104	50.48	193	93	48.19	-2.29	5.01	.46
Total	489	219	44.79	489	208	42.54	-2.25	3.25	.69

Table IV indicates the retention scores of those who heard the "one side" and the "both sides" speeches. A higher mean score for the men and for the group as a whole which heard the "both sides" speech is shown. The differences are statistically significant. When the subjects were compared according to their initial attitude toward the speaker's thesis, it was found that the largest advantage for the "both sides" presentation was among those who were initially opposed to lowering the voting age. When the subjects were compared on the basis of A.C.E. scores and year in college, no significant differences emerged; the slight retention score advantage for the "both sides" treatment was approximately the same whether the listener had a high or low A.C.E. score and whether he was a freshman or an upper classman.

TABLE IV

RETENTION SCORES FOR THOSE LISTENING TO THE "ONE SIDE" SPEECH
AND THOSE LISTENING TO THE "BOTH SIDES" SPEECH

	"One Side" Speech			"Both Sides" Speech			Diff.	S.E.	C.R.
	N	Total Score	Mean	N	Total Score	Mean			
Men	283	9936	35.11	296	10709	36.18	1.07	.412	2.60 ^{**}
Women	206	6910	33.54	193	6498	33.67	.13	.913	.14
Total	489	16846	34.45	489	17207	35.19	.74	.337	2.20 [*]

** Significant at the 1% level.

* Significant at the 5% level.

CONCLUSIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS

1. The men who heard the "professor" showed a significantly greater percentage of shift of opinion toward the speaker's thesis than did the men who heard the "student"; most of this difference was contributed by those who were initially favorable to the speaker's viewpoint.
2. Percentages of shift of opinion for women who heard the "professor" and the "student" were not significantly different.
3. Retention scores of those who heard the "professor" and those who heard the "student" were not significantly different.
4. The "both sides" speech did not produce a significantly greater shift of opinion than did the "one side" speech.
5. The "both sides" speech produced significantly higher mean retention scores than did the "one side" speech among the male listeners. Those who were initially opposed to the speaker's thesis showed the greatest difference.
6. Mean retention scores for the women who listened to the "both sides" speech and those who listened to the "one side" speech were not significantly different.
7. A significantly greater percentage of women shifted in opinion than did men.
8. Men had significantly higher mean scores in retention than women.

9. The percentage of shift of opinion varied according to the initial attitudes of the listeners, those initially undecided showing the largest percentage, those initially favorable showing the next largest percentage and those initially opposed showing the smallest percentage of the shift. Differences between groups were significant in each instance.
10. There were significant differences in mean scores in retention for those who were initially favorable to the speaker's thesis as compared with those who were initially opposed, the former having the higher mean scores.
11. There were significant differences in mean scores in retention for those who shifted their opinions as compared with those who did not shift, the former having the higher mean scores.

This study did not, as Hovland's, show a significantly greater shift of opinion for the "both sides" presentation. One reason may have to do with a difference in the audience. The subjects in the present study were selected from a group with higher intelligence and more years of education than the group in the Hovland study. The average A.C.E. scores of the subjects in this study is at the 70th percentile of all students entering college and their average high school rank is at the 72nd percentile. Almost half of Hovland's group had not finished high school. These facts may be related to the effectiveness of the type of "both sides" treatment used here. The "both sides" presentation used in these studies merely mentions the opposing arguments; it does not develop them or support them with evidence. A less critical audience might be satisfied that both sides had been given in such a case but a more intelligent audience might not. Since the supposed advantage of this type of arrangement depends on the opposed listeners satisfaction that the force of their position has been considered, this advantage might be lost where they are not thus satisfied. This may have happened in the present study. Further research might be carried out to see whether a more comprehensive type of "both sides" speech would secure a greater shift of opinion among college students.

The higher mean score in retention for the "both sides" speech may be due to several factors. It may be (as Hovland hypothesized) that if the opposed listener hears some of his own arguments stated, his reception of other statements will also be improved. It may be that since the "both sides" speech is longer, the subject is discussed more and this influences scores in retention to some extent. Finally, it may be that the order of presentation of statements in the "both sides" speech encourages better attention. That is, in this speech the speaker says, "Those who favor lowering the voting age believe that....but those who oppose this change maintain that...." The juxtaposition of arguments may serve as a form of emphasis which draws attention to statements which follow. Such a focusing of attention might not occur when all the arguments are on the same side of the issue as in the "one side" speech.

The effect of the prestige of the speaker on shift of opinion was similar to the results Haiman secured with one important exception. In this study subgroup analysis revealed that the women did not shift significantly more for the prestige speaker than for the non-prestige speaker. No adequate explanation for this difference seems apparent, but it does suggest the need for further research in this area with sufficient analysis to establish differential reactions to prestige among different groups.