

Two field experiments on leadership and political persuasion

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Abstract: Does discussion with political elites result in persuasion of non-elites? We identify three dimensions of potential persuasion: substantive policy preferences, attributions regarding the politician, and changes in behavior. We ran two field experiments consisting in 21 online town hall meetings involving twelve sitting U. S. Representatives, one Senator, and their respective constituents. Study 1 examined 20 small town halls with Representatives (average 22 participants per town hall); study 2 examined a large (175 person) town hall with a Senator. Contrary to the long-standing “minimal effects” literature, we find significant causal effects from participating on all three dimensions of persuasion in both experiments, and no such effects on issues that were not discussed extensively in the sessions.

One sentence summary: We present two field experiments involving twelve U. S. Representatives and one Senator, finding substantial persuasion regarding policy preferences, attributions about the participating Member of Congress, and political action (voting for the Member).

Do political leaders persuade? As thinkers ranging from Aristotle (1) up to our own day have noted, persuasion—a change in the attitude or behavior of a citizen caused by an appeal from a political leader—is integral to leadership. In contemporary scholarship, the link between elite persuasion and mass opinion has been studied intensively (2-3), with one long-standing literature arguing for “minimal effects” (4). Moreover, virtually all of the evidence we have of substantial elite persuasion effects is either indirect and in the aggregate, or based on laboratory experiments that only simulate a few features of real elite-mass interactions. Political scientists and psychologists have accumulated aggregate-level evidence of elite persuasion by studying mass media messages and advertising (5-6), large-*N* surveys (7-8), and laboratory experiments with hypothetical elite-mass interactions (9-10). However, this evidence speaks much less directly to whether and how individual elites persuade their constituents than we might hope. Although the contours of direct persuasion may mirror those in the aggregate, and hypothetical scenarios offered in lab settings might yield dynamics similar to those in real political interactions, there is

1. Aristotle. *Rhetoric*.

2. P.E. Converse, in *Ideology and Discontent*, D.E. Apter, Ed. (Free Press, New York, 1964).

3. J. Zaller, *The Nature and Origin of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge Univ. Press, New York, 1992).

4. S.F. Finkel, “Reexamining the ‘Minimal Effects’ Model in Recent Presidential Campaigns.” *J. of Politics*, **55**, 1 (1993).

5. S.Iyengar, D.R. Kinder, *News That Matters*, (Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989).

6. A.S. Gerber, J.G. Gimpel, D.P. Green, D.R. Shaw, “How large and long-lasting are the persuasive effects of televised campaign ads? Results from a randomized field experiment.” *Am. Polit. Sci. Rev.*, **105**, 135 (2011).

7. B. I. Page, R. Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public* (Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992).

8. R. M. Alvarez, J. Brehm, *Hard Choices, Easy Answers*, (Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, NJ, 2002).

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10. D.C. Chong, J.N. Druckman, “Framing public opinion in competitive democracies,” *Am. Polit. Sci. Rev.*, **101**, 637 (2007).

reason to think that they do not reliably track each other (11). In short, we have remarkably little direct evidence that appeals from specific political elites affect the attitudes or behaviors of specific citizens, despite prominent accounts of representative democracy hinging on persuasion in such relationships.

The absence of such evidence is all the more striking in that elites frequently do appeal directly to their constituents. Town halls, stump speeches, and personal contact between individual elites and members of the public are standard features of modern politics (12-13). We identify three dimensions on which to assess persuasion: substantive, attributional, and behavioral. *Substantive persuasion* involves changes in attitudes about an issue. *Attributional persuasion* involves changes in opinions about the source (the Member). And *behavioral persuasion* involves changes in behavior.

Substantive persuasion has been the focus in the existing literature (14), and is important because it affects public support for policies, and may lead to behavioral changes. Attributional persuasion will be critical in those (many) moments of action by a leader surrounded by ambiguity—is the leader taking this action for personal gain or for the greater good? Indeed, most Members’ primary communication goals focus on presentation of self (15, 16)—persuading constituents regarding their personal qualities (e.g., being trustworthy or competent). Attributional persuasion is necessary for effective leadership, because positive attributions mean

11. See Neblo et. al. “Who Wants to Deliberate – and Why?” *Am. Polit. Sci. Rev.*, **104**, 576 (2010), for an example of a sharp reversal in attitudes and behavior between hypothetical and real conditions. For other results, see Lazer et. al. (2011), Esterling et. al. (2011a), Esterling et. al. (2011b).

12. Fenno, R.F., 1978. *Home style: House members in their districts*, Little, Brown.

13. W.T. Bianco, *Trust: Representatives and constituents*, (Univ of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 1994); Neblo (2005).

14. Petty, R.E., Wegener, D.T. & Fabrigar, L.R., 1997. Attitudes and attitude change. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 48.

15. Fenno, R.F., 1978. *Home style: House members in their districts*, Little, Brown.

16. Bianco, W.T., 1994. *Trust: Representatives and constituents*, Univ of Michigan Pr.

that ambiguous events will be interpreted in the leader's benefit, facilitating survival and providing some freedom for movement politically.

Behavioral persuasion is necessary for leaders to stay in power—to mobilize action, e.g., voting. There is an enormous literature on political behavior, e.g., the correlates of voting behavior and participation more generally (17), the role that elections play in mobilizing or demobilizing voters, the role that networks play in mobilizing other forms of political action (18, 19). However, relatively little has been written on the behavioral effects of direct appeals from elites.

To study relevant elite persuasion more directly, we designed a series of online town-hall meetings in which members of the public interacted directly with their Members of Congress (MOC). Each session focused on a single policy issue. Participants could address their MOC, and listen to their Member's responses to the questions and comments posed by the group. In total, twelve Members of the U.S. House of Representatives (Study 1) and one U.S. Senator (Study 2), including Republicans and Democrats, participated in twenty-one online town-halls.

Table 1. Participating Members of Congress

| <i>Member</i> | <i>Party-State</i> | <i>Study</i> |
|----------------------|--------------------|--------------|
| Rep. Earl Blumenauer | D-OR | 1 |
| Rep. Michael Capuano | D-MA | 1 |
| Rep. James Clyburn | D-SC | 1 |
| Rep. Mike Conaway | R-TX | 1 |
| Rep. Anna Eshoo | D-CA | 1 |
| Rep. Jack Kingston | R-GA | 1 |
| Rep. Zoe Lofgren | D-CA | 1 |
| Rep. Don Manzullo | R-IL | 1 |
| Rep. Jim Matheson | D-UT | 1 |

17. Burns, N., Schlozman, K.L. & Verba, S., 2001. *The private roots of public action: Gender, equality, and political participation*, Harvard Univ Pr.

18. Nickerson, D.W., 2008. Is voting contagious? Evidence from two field experiments. *American Political Science Review*, 102(01), pp.49–57.

19. Mutz, D.C., 2004. Cross-cutting social networks: Testing democratic theory in practice. *American Political Science Review*, 96(01), pp.111–126.

| | | |
|------------------------|------|---|
| Rep. David Price | D-NC | 1 |
| Rep. George Radanovich | R-CA | 1 |
| Rep. Dave Weldon | R-FL | 1 |
| Senator Carl Levin | D-MI | 2 |

In study 1, there was robust variation among the Members who participated: five Republicans and seven Democrats, spread across all four major geographical regions, two women, an African-American, and representatives of both parties' leadership. All were running for re-election. And they were diverse ideologically, including one Member from each party who voted against their party on the topic under discussion (i.e., recent immigration legislation).

Each session was moderated by one of the authors. During each session, constituents typed comments and questions into an online discussion platform. After reviewing these contributions, a screener posted them to the whole group in approximately the order in which they were received (20). The MOC responded through a telephone linked to a computer. Constituents received the MOC's responses by either listening over computer speakers or reading a real time transcription. After thirty-five minutes, the MOC and staff logged off. In experiment 1, the constituents were then directed to a chat room to have an open ended discussion, which lasted twenty-five minutes. In experiment 2, the main session was extended and the chat session dropped (because the larger number of participants made a plenary chat impractical). Figure 1 illustrates one of the sessions with Rep. George Radanovich (R-CA) [sample video is available in Supporting Online Materials].

20. The screener played no active role in facilitating the discussion, and had no knowledge of the study hypotheses or the content of the surveys. Questions were screened if they were duplicative of a prior question.

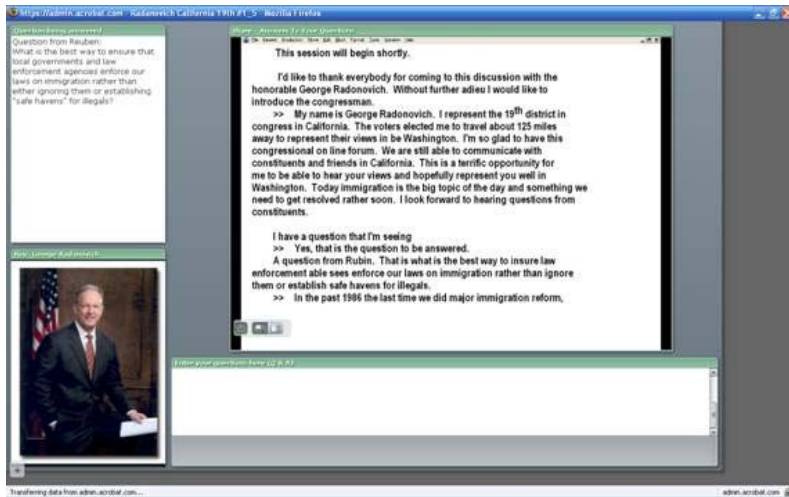


Figure 1: Screen-shot of online town-hall with Representative George Radanovich.

Participants completed a series of questionnaires before and after the sessions that asked their opinions on a variety of topics related to the issue under discussion. The questionnaires also asked about trust and approval of the MOC, as well as whether participants intended to vote for the MOC. Finally, a survey fielded after the November elections asked participants how they actually voted. We test whether participating Members of Congress were effective in their persuasive appeals – i.e., the hypothesis that, on average, meeting with a political elite changes attitudes and behaviors of members of the public in the direction sought by the elite.

In the control condition, here referred to as information only (IO), participants read background materials about the issue. In the treatment condition, referred to as the deliberative session (DS), in addition to reading the background materials, participants were invited to attend an online town-hall meeting with their MOC (see supporting online material [SOM], for further details on the research design). Information in the background materials was drawn from non-partisan sources (e.g., Congressional Research Service and OMB reports), edited to a ninth grade reading level, and vetted by the participating MOCs' staffers (background materials included in SOM).

In our first study, participants were randomly assigned to meet with their sitting Member of the House of Representatives to discuss the issue of illegal immigration. The participants were recruited from high-quality, national samples (see SOM). Twenty sessions with these twelve MOCs took place between June and October 2006. Given the novelty of the study, we did not have sufficient information to reliably estimate compliance rates in advance (which are needed to ensure a sufficient number in each as-treated cell). Therefore, we used a two-step process to assign each participant to a treatment condition. All participants completed a baseline survey in which they were asked whether they would like to participate in the DS, to complete surveys only, or to opt out entirely. Of the 2237 participants who completed this initial survey, 1566 indicated that they would like to participate. Of these, 1259 participants were then randomly assigned to a treatment condition (21). We also assigned 201 participants who indicated that they were not willing to participate in the DS to the IO condition.

We study the responses of participants on a follow-up survey fielded in the weeks immediately following the sessions. To evaluate the effects of elite persuasion, we used instrumental variables (IV) regression to estimate the complier average causal effect (CACE), which is the effect of attending the session on the attitudes and behavior of those who would attend if assigned, i.e. the compliers (22). Of the 1084 participants assigned to DS, 374 complied with treatment and attended the session. Of these, 264 completed the follow up surveys; additionally, 215 of the 710 non-compliers completed the follow up. Of the 376 assigned to IO, 211 completed the follow up surveys. We instrument for attendance at the DS using assignment to DS. We further condition on willingness to attend as measured by the filter question and on

21. Some participants were also assigned to a third “full control” group that did not receive the materials, but we focus on the information only control here.

22. J. D. Angrist, G. W. Imbens, D. B. Rubin, “Identification of Causal Effects Using Instrumental Variables,” *J. Am. Stat. Assoc.* **91** (434) 444, (1996).

the pretreatment response from the baseline survey (see SOM). All dependent variables have been rescaled to fall between 0 and 1.

To differentiate persuasion from attitude change via other mechanisms, in each study we compare responses on two issues, one of which received a great deal of attention in the sessions and one which received almost no attention (23). In study 1, we asked participants about whether they supported a path to citizenship (or amnesty) for illegal immigrants currently residing within the U.S. We also asked participants whether they supported a change in the number of immigrants allowed to enter the U.S. legally. Path to citizenship came up frequently in the sessions, while changes in legal immigration levels received almost no discussion—the words “amnesty” and “citizenship” appeared more than 150 times in the session transcripts, while the phrase “legal immigration” appears only 6 times. Moreover, in those cases when the latter phrase appeared, it was obvious from context that the topic of discussion was actually whether illegal immigrants should be able “earn” citizenship.

Table 2. Results for Study 1 (House of Representatives)

| Outcome | B | SE | P | N |
|-----------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| <i>Policy Attitudes</i> | | | | |
| Path to Citizenship | .15 | .06 | .01 | 677 |
| Legal Immigration | .03 | .04 | .35 | 676 |
| <i>Attitudes toward MOC</i> | | | | |
| Trust | .11 | .03 | .00 | 494 |
| Approve | .10 | .04 | .01 | 674 |
| Vote Intent | .09 | .03 | .00 | 636 |
| <i>Behavior toward MOC</i> | | | | |
| Actual Vote | .15 | .07 | .04 | 483 |

Note: IV regression estimates with heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors

23. The comparison is not a true placebo test because we could not randomize the particular topics that citizens and members discussed in the sessions.

The analyses reveal strong evidence of elite persuasion (see Table 2 and left panel of Figure 2). On path to citizenship, participants who attended the session moved toward their Member's position more than they would have in the IO condition ($P = 0.01$). However, as expected, attendees did not move significantly toward their Member on the issue of legal immigration ($P = 0.35$). Beyond attitudes on issues, attendees also exhibited changes in their attitudes toward the member. On average, attendees showed markedly increased trust ($P = 0.00$), approval ($P = 0.01$), and intent to vote for the Member ($P = 0.00$). Moreover, we find evidence for strong behavioral persuasion, where attendance in the session with the Member was associated with a 15% increase in likelihood of voting for the Member in the November election ($P = 0.04$). (See Figure 2 for a graphical representation of the results.)

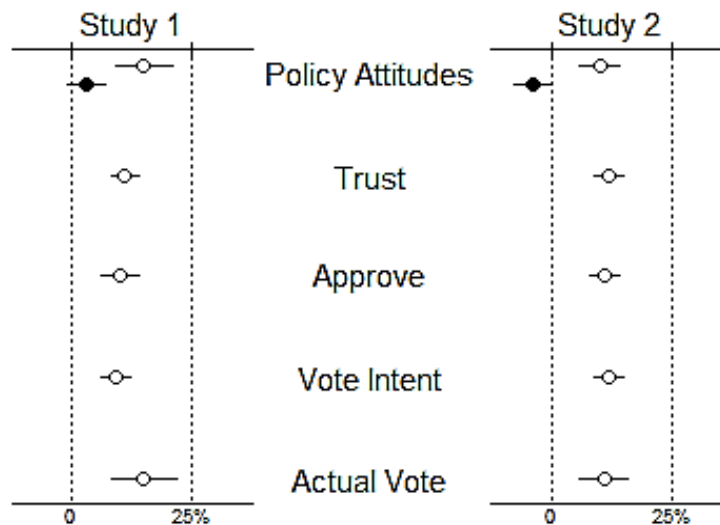


Figure 2: Complier average causal effects from attending a deliberative session, based on instrumental variables regression (study 1) and randomization inference (study 2). Responses to each question were rescaled to range from 0 to 1. Bars indicate one standard error. Policy attitudes in study 1 are path to citizenship (white) and legal immigration (black); in study 2 they are waterboarding (white) and closing Guantanamo (black).

Although the findings of study 1 are strong, several factors may limit their generalizability. First, the immigration issue may have been particularly suited to elite

persuasion. Second, the small size of the sessions (8 to 30 participants) may have increased the likelihood of persuasion. Third, because of the novelty of the study and cost considerations, we used an unusual assignment procedure (the filter question before random assignment).

We therefore conducted a second study in March 2008 using a similar research design with a streamlined assignment procedure. Participants ($N = 900$) were recruited from a nonprobability sample and randomly assigned to meet with their sitting U.S. Senator (Carl Levin, D-MI) in a single online forum. Of the 462 assigned to the deliberative session (DS), 175 attended the session, and discussed issues surrounding terrorism: e.g., torture, rendition, and the detainees held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. As in the first study, some participants were randomly assigned to receive only background materials on the issue (24). Again, we report estimates of average causal effects on those who attended. But with the superior assignment procedure in this study, we were able to utilize randomization inference rather than IV regression to calculate estimates, thus testing the sharp null hypothesis of no persuasion effects (25).

We again compare effects on one topic that received a great deal of attention to one that received almost no attention. The topic of waterboarding came up frequently during the session, while the topic of whether to close the detainment facility at Guantanamo came up rarely. Additionally, Sen. Levin, in the session, took a very clear position on the former and much less so on the latter.

Table 3. Results for Study 2 (Senator Levin)

| Outcome | B | SE | <i>P</i> | <i>N</i> |
|-------------------------|------|-----|----------|----------|
| <i>Policy Attitudes</i> | | | | |
| Waterboarding | .10 | .03 | .00 | 495 |
| Close Guantánamo | -.04 | .03 | .24 | 497 |

24. As in the first study, participants could also be assigned to a third “true control” group. We focus exclusively on those assigned either to DS or IO in this article.

25. A. S. Gerber and D. P. Green, *Field Experiments*, (Norton, New York, 2012).

| | | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| <i>Attitudes toward MOC</i> | | | | |
| Trust | .12 | .03 | .00 | 498 |
| Approve | .11 | .03 | .00 | 487 |
| Vote Intent | .12 | .04 | .00 | 483 |
| <i>Behavior toward MOC</i> | | | | |
| Actual Vote | .11 | .05 | .04 | 431 |

Note: Differences in inverse probability of treatment assignment-weighted means, standard errors, and tests of the sharp null.

The results reveal a pattern quite similar to the first study (see Table 3 and right panel of Figure 2). On waterboarding, attendees moved toward the Senator’s position substantially more than they would have in the IO condition ($P = 0.01$), while they actually moved slightly away from the Senator’s position on whether to close Guantanamo ($P = 0.26$). Attendees in the second study also exhibited changes in their attitudes and behaviors toward the Senator. On average, attendees show increased trust ($P = 0.00$), approval ($P = 0.00$), and intent to vote for the Senator ($P = 0.00$). In November, these attitudes translated into a change in actual behavior, evidenced by an 11% increase in the propensity to actually vote for Sen. Levin ($P = 0.04$).

Conclusion

There is surprisingly little evidence for direct, specific persuasion in real political settings, much less for persuasion between citizens and their elected representatives. In this paper we have provided evidence that Members of Congress were able to persuade their constituents regarding substantive policy opinions, attributions about the Member, and their behavior (in this case voting for the Member at increased rates). While further research and analysis will be necessary to better understand and assess such persuasion and its implications for modern, mass politics, we have shown the promise of field experiments to literally experiment with democracy—with real politicians communicating with citizens, and consequent changes in attitudes and behaviors. Further, while the setting is distinctly 21st century—representatives talking to a dispersed group

of constituents via new communication technology—the basic issues implicated here surrounding leadership, interpersonal communication, and persuasion transcend the era, the technology, and the particularities of American political institutions.

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