

HOW INFORMATIVE AND PERSUASIVE IS SIMPLE ELITE COMMUNICATION? EFFECTS ON LIKE-MINDED AND POLARIZED AUDIENCES

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Abstract In the past two decades, increasing levels of simplicity in political elite rhetoric have drawn both empirical interest and normative concern from political scientists. While conventional wisdom holds that politicians simplify their public communications because “simplicity works,” the way citizens respond to such messages has hardly been investigated. This study presents the results of two experiments testing the effects of simplicity on two major goals of elite communication: informing citizens and persuading them. Results show that simple rhetoric has lower informative value for citizens than complex rhetoric, regardless of the issue being addressed and the partisan identity of the speaker. In terms of persuasion, results point to a conditional effect. When a politician addresses a like-minded audience, simplicity sways public opinion. However, when addressing a polarized audience, simple rhetoric is ineffective.

In recent decades, political elites have steadily reduced the complexity of their language when communicating with the public (Lim 2002; Shogan 2007). This change has been linked with broad anti-intellectual trends affecting politics (Lim 2008). Another explanation emphasizes the abundance of information sources citizens can choose from, as well as the increasing pace at which information is

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disseminated, which require political communicators to use shorter messages and display a clear bottom line (Patterson 1993; Sheaffer 2001; Rinke 2016). The simplification of elite communication is often seen as a cause for concern since it comes at the expense of more nuanced and thorough arguments, which are necessary when negotiating solutions to complex social problems.

Short-term circumstances are also correlated with shifts in rhetorical complexity. Politicians simplify their public communications during election campaigns (Tetlock 1981; Conway et al. 2012), at periods of international or domestic crises (Suedfeld, Leighton, and Conway 2006), and when appealing to less educated voters (Spirling 2016). On the other hand, their speeches tend to increase in complexity when they are held accountable for their words (Tetlock 1983) and once they assume a powerful political position in which they are expected to take multiple interests into account (Suedfeld 2010). A common explanation given to short-term shifts in complexity is the understanding among elected politicians that “the simple rhetoric that allowed one to win power will not allow one to deal with the complexities of actually governing” (Thoemmes and Conway 2007, 215).

While systematic shifts in complexity across time and context are well documented, we currently have little direct evidence on how members of the public react to simplified messages. The existing literature focuses heavily on rhetorical complexity as a dependent rather than an independent variable and adopts correlational designs that are unable, by definition, to establish causality. To address this gap, two experiments were designed, both of which carefully manipulated rhetorical complexity and tested its effects on the informative and persuasive power of elite communication. The results point to two major patterns. First, a simple elite communication is less informative to citizens than a complex communication, regardless of the policy issue under discussion and the partisan identity of the speaker. Second, rhetorical complexity affects persuasion, but only when specific conditions are met. When a politician discusses an issue on which public opinion is divided, a simple, one-sided address is less persuasive than a complex message that integrates considerations from both sides of the issue. In contrast, when the public holds a rather uniform opinion on an issue, a simple message increases persuasion. It does so, however, only when the speaker advocates a stance that is congruent with public opinion on that issue. This conditional effect emphasizes the need to consider the interaction between the content of a message and existing public opinion on an issue when trying to predict elites’ success at swaying public opinion.

Simple and Complex Elite Communication

A large literature examines the complexity levels at which political elites communicate with the public. While several conceptualizations of rhetorical

complexity exist, the major body of research on this topic relies on the theoretical and methodological premises of integrative complexity (Suedfeld 2010). This concept measures the tendency of communicators to: (a) take multiple points of view on a single topic into account; and (b) recognize trade-offs and interrelations among points of view. Messages low on integrative complexity reject dissonant information; minimize conflict into categorical “black-and-white,” “all-or-nothing” judgments; and lack recognition that several perspectives on an issue can be valid at the same time. On the other hand, complex messages consider different interpretations of the same issue simultaneously and present possible trade-offs and interactions among those alternatives (Tetlock 1983; Amsalem et al. 2017).

When measuring integrative complexity, two elements need to be considered. The first, differentiation, refers to the number of dimensions of information that are acknowledged. Differentiation exists when the communicator refers explicitly to more than one dimension of a single topic. The second element, integration, refers to the development of connections among the differentiated dimensions. When dimensions are presented as operating in isolation, or are simply counted, a communication displays no integration, but when dimensions are presented as operating according to more complex patterns, such as a trade-off or a causal mechanism, the message displays integration. In short, the higher the differentiation and integration of a communication, the more complex it is considered to be.

Studies have extensively explored the political conditions correlated with changes in integrative complexity (e.g., election campaigns decrease it), but have dealt less with the way variations in this variable affect citizens. In the one study I am aware of that experimentally tested the impact of complexity on citizens (Conway et al. 2012), real campaign speeches by two US presidential candidates, Barack Obama and John McCain, were collected and coded for complexity. Subjects then were exposed to either a simple or a complex real statement, and average candidate evaluations were measured. A design utilizing real speeches not only is prone to pre-treatment effects (Druckman and Leeper 2012), as citizens are likely to have been exposed to those speeches before the experiment, but also does not account for crucial variations between speeches in aspects such as the topic of the speech, the policy position being communicated, and even the very words the politician uses. Voters’ prior attitudes on and knowledge of real candidates are additional potential confounders. In sum, if we wish to conclude that complexity alone is responsible for observed differences in outcome variables, citizens should be exposed to rhetoric that is identical in all dimensions except complexity. The current study employs such a manipulation and tests its impact on the informative and persuasive power of politicians’ communications.

Information Effect

A major goal of elite communication is to inform the public. When addressing voters, politicians seek to deliver clear messages that can be easily understood and stored in memory for later use (Redlawsk 2001). Once information is stored in memory, it increases the salience of certain considerations in people's minds and makes attitude change more likely (Scheufele and Iyengar 2017). The first goal of this study is to explore the effect of rhetorical complexity on elites' capacity to inform constituents about their policy positions.

At first glance, one may expect simple messages to be more easily recalled than complex ones. Some work in cognitive psychology emphasizes a human preference for simplicity in information processing, demonstrating that the simpler a new piece of information is, the easier it is for an individual to learn, process, and remember (Chater and Vitányi 2003; Feldman 2003). This simplicity principle, however, was formulated based on evidence from classic cognitive tasks, such as finding patterns in sensory input. I propose that when people process political information, two other mechanisms affect message memorability. The first is the level of elaboration a message evokes in people's minds. Elaboration is defined as "the process of connecting new information to other information stored in memory...or the connection of two new bits of information together in new ways" (Eveland 2001, 573). For example, a voter who thinks about the implications of a policy statement engages in elaboration. Studies find that messages that spur elaboration are easier to learn (Petty, Briñol, and Priester 2008). In the context of the current study, since integrative policy statements connect competing considerations in sophisticated ways (Conway et al. 2008), such as trade-off, hierarchy, or causality, they are expected to evoke more elaboration in voters' minds than rigid and inflexible simple messages. The elaboration principle predicts that people exposed to integrated messages will examine the message more carefully and be better able to connect it to prior knowledge.

The second mechanism does not concern people's effort to process a message, but the message itself. A recurrent finding in psychological research is that people learn better when information is presented to them in meaningful chunks or clusters. A higher-order connection between information bits increases the ability to recall multiple items or ideas, compared to a presentation of each item or idea separately (Gobet et al. 2001). This principle applies to the processing of political information, where it was also found that "grouping discrete bits of information into a meaningful cognitive structure...facilitates the retrieval of information from memory" (Lodge and Hamill 1986, 507). I expect a message that integrates dimensions—for example, a politician arguing that a trade-off exists between dimensions A and B of some issue—to be easier to remember than a message considering dimensions A and B separately. When two considerations are linked within a message, recalling one should more easily bring the other to mind.

Persuasion Effect

The most important goal of elite communication in politics is changing the way citizens think about issues (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Chong and Druckman 2007). The second goal of this study, therefore, is to examine whether simple rhetoric is more or less persuasive than complex rhetoric. My empirical expectations on the nature of this effect build on several theoretical perspectives. A first expectation is that rhetorical complexity represents variations in “message-sidedness.” The persuasion literature in psychology (O’Keefe 2002) distinguishes a one-sided message, which ignores opposing arguments, from a two-sided message that discusses opposing arguments explicitly. This line of research finds no consistent overall difference in the persuasiveness of one-sided and two-sided messages. It does, however, point to an interaction effect. When a two-sided message is refutational (i.e., the speaker attempts to refute the opposing argument in some fashion), it is more persuasive than a one-sided message. However, a nonrefutational two-sided message is less persuasive than a one-sided message, probably because it reminds the audience of opposing arguments, but does nothing to attack their plausibility, criticize the reasoning underlying them, or present evidence that undermines them (Allen 1991; O’Keefe 1999). This suggests that the mere inclusion of an opposing argument within a communication (i.e., differentiating perspectives) is not sufficient to increase its persuasiveness; in fact, if the counterargument is not refuted, an additional argument may *decrease* persuasion. More specifically, the sidedness literature, while offering guidance on the overall difference between one- and two-sided messages, does not deal with how the integration of conflicting perspectives on an issue contributes to persuasion.

A second expectation is that complex rhetoric is perceived by voters as more ambiguous than simple rhetoric, and therefore more persuasive. This expectation builds on previous studies showing that ambiguity is an effective communicative strategy for elites seeking to maximize their support (Shepsle 1972; Page 1976; Tomz and Van Houweling 2009). According to ambiguity theory, remaining vague on an issue draws fewer objections than taking a clear, but controversial, stance. Rhetorical complexity resembles ambiguity in the sense that a speaker integrating conflicting perspectives of an issue incorporates multiple viewpoints of the issue into the communication, which may signal flexibility and a willingness to consider alternative points of view. It is, however, a distinct concept. While an ambiguous speaker either communicates multiple stances on an issue or makes statements lacking in substantive policy content (Milita, Ryan, and Simas 2014), rhetorical complexity represents variations in the way a speaker justifies *the same stance* (Tetlock 1983). In other words, while ambiguity blurs a candidate’s true policy position, complexity introduces uncertainty over the reasons, or considerations, behind an explicit position. Theoretically, both types of ambiguity may increase persuasion.

The Moderating Role of Political Issues

One factor that seems highly likely to moderate the effect of complexity on persuasion is the issue under discussion. Specifically, whether the issue is conflictual or consensual should have important implications for persuasion. As noted earlier, a simple message is, by definition, one-sided, while a complex message integrates considerations on both sides of the issue. With this definition in mind, assume that, as demonstrated in the upper panel of [figure 1](#), the distribution of public opinion on a certain issue is bimodal, or polarized, as is often the case in politics ([Fiorina and Abrams 2008](#)). In this conceptual example, where about half of the public is on side A of the issue and half on side B, a speaker considering only one side (for instance, side A) appeals to about half of the public. However, for the same speaker, introducing considerations from both sides of the issue has the potential to persuade at least *some* people from side B, which should increase the overall persuasiveness of the message.

In contrast, if the distribution of public opinion on an issue is not bimodal but, as in the lower panel of [figure 1](#), skewed, integrating considerations from side B becomes unnecessary and, most likely, even detrimental, as the public largely opposes that perspective. The effect of simple rhetoric is thus not only conditional on the distribution of public opinion on the issue, but also on the side the politician is taking. On a consensual issue, a one-sided message should be more persuasive when it is congruent with the prevalent view among the public. In contrast, when the stance being communicated is incongruent with existing public opinion, variations in complexity should not affect persuasion, since people will disagree with the stance regardless of its complexity.

The conditional effect described above draws on the motivated reasoning literature in political science ([Lodge and Taber 2013](#)), which posits that people are more likely to be convinced by information that reinforces their existing attitudes. In particular, scholars have observed a “prior attitude effect” ([Taber and Lodge 2006](#)) in which people perceive evidence consistent with their prior opinions as stronger and more relevant. More specifically, previous studies demonstrate that this principle applies to citizens’ responses to elite communication. For instance, [Grose, Malhotra, and Van Houweling’s \(2015\)](#) experiments find that senators tailor their communications to constituents by emphasizing actions they have taken in accord with those constituents’ preferences, and that this “tailoring” of messages increases constituents’ agreement with the positions communicated. Another example is [Tesler’s \(2015\)](#) finding that on a variety of political issues, media and campaign communications that prime citizens’ predispositions lead them to change their policy preferences in line with their prior attitudes.

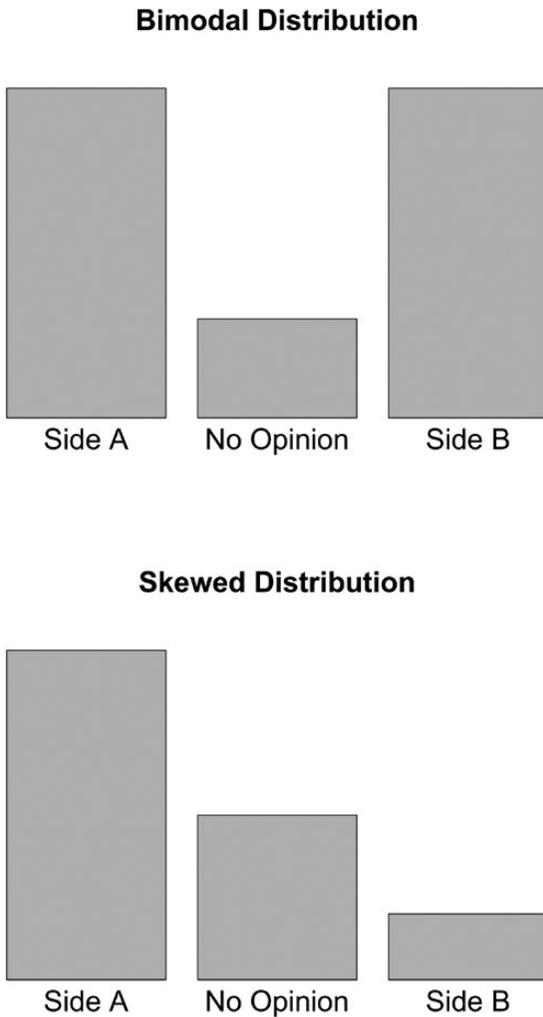


Figure 1. A conceptual demonstration of bimodal and skewed distributions of public opinion on an issue.

The Current Study

To test the informative and persuasive power of simple elite communication, two experiments were designed. Both experiments manipulated rhetorical complexity in the same way but did so with regard to two distinct issues—one highly contentious and the other relatively consensual. The topic of the first experiment was illegal immigration in the United States, which is a contested issue on which public opinion is divided and a clear left–right debate

exists. A 2016 Pew Research Center poll found, for instance, that 75 percent of Democrats believe “immigrants today strengthen the country because of their hard work and talents.” Among Republicans, however, only 35 percent share that view. Similarly, this poll found that 88 percent of Democrats support a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants who meet certain conditions, while among Republicans the support is only 59 percent (Pew Research Center 2016).

The second experiment confronted participants with speeches on a relatively consensual issue: paid parental leave. While the question of whether employers should provide new parents several weeks of paid leave receives periodical attention from legislators and the media, evidence from public opinion polls shows that Americans widely support paid parental leave across party lines. While Democrats are generally more supportive of paid leave than Republicans, at least three-quarters of each group support it (Pew Research Center 2017). Online Appendix A presents actual public opinion distributions on both issues, based on evidence from the two experiments reported below. In short, the distributions follow the logic of figure 1 and show that Americans disagree on how to treat illegal immigrants much more than they do on whether paid leave should be provided to employees.

Experiment 1: Illegal Immigration

The first experiment was conducted September 15–18, 2016. A sample of 947 American adults was recruited from the online panel of Survey Sampling International (SSI).¹ Details on the composition of the sample are available in Online Appendix B. In the experiment, subjects were exposed to statements by a fictional political candidate who advocated the same policy stance at differing levels of complexity. The design included three complexity conditions. In the low-complexity condition, the speaker advocated a position using one big idea without differentiating dimensions of the topic. In the moderate-complexity condition, the speaker supported the same position but acknowledged two possible ways of viewing it. These two dimensions, however, were not integrated: One was supported and the other rejected (but not explicitly refuted). Finally, in the high-complexity condition, the speaker supported the very same position again, but this time recognized two legitimate dimensions of the issue *and* integrated them by arguing that both should be balanced when making a decision. A major advantage of this three-level manipulation is that it

1. Since the SSI platform does not invite respondents to participate in a single survey but to multiple surveys at random, it is not possible to compute a response rate. Among the 1,981 respondents who logged into the survey, 947 have completed it (47.8 percent completion rate) and 1,034 were excluded either because they did not complete the survey or because their demographic quota categories (age, education, and gender) had already been filled.

alters both components of integrative complexity—differentiation and integration—thus allowing to identify the precise source of the effect.

To test whether partisanship conditions the effects of complexity, the candidate's party affiliation also was manipulated. While the liberal view on immigration favors allowing illegal immigrants already in the United States the right to live in the country legally if they meet certain requirements, the conservative view opposes naturalization and supports increasing law enforcement (Egan 2014). The partisanship manipulation was based on these positions, which resulted in a 3 (low/moderate/high complexity) \times 2 (Democratic/Republican candidate) between-groups design.

PROCEDURE AND STIMULUS MATERIAL

After being randomly assigned to one of the six experimental groups, subjects read a direct quote of a political speech pertaining to illegal immigration. The full stimulus material can be found in Online Appendix C. To avoid pretreatment effects (Druckman and Leeper 2012), the speeches presented to subjects were fictional. Yet, they were constructed to resemble real-world political rhetoric as much as possible in terms of language, structure, and length. To ensure that complexity is not confounded by other variables, the length and readability of the texts, as well as the ideological stance communicated in the speeches, were held constant across complexity conditions. These procedures are described in further detail in Online Appendix C.

Using a hypothetical rather than a real political candidate enabled the elimination of crucial differences between subjects in attitudes toward and knowledge of actual candidates. In order for the hypothetical candidate not to resemble some actual individual, a common name was selected (Paul Miller), and only minimal information on the candidate was provided. A Senate race was chosen as the context for the speech because I wished to examine national-level issues, and exposing subjects to speeches by a hypothetical presidential candidate during the days of the heated Trump–Clinton race was not likely to be perceived as very realistic.

Since online news websites constitute a dominant way for citizens to get their political information, implementing the stimuli in a realistic online context increases the external validity of the study (Iyengar 2011). Reading a written message is also appropriate in this context, since citizens rarely attend political events and typically get informed on what politicians say from quotes they read in the print or electronic media. The speeches were constructed to be relatively short (one paragraph in length) in an attempt to resemble the manner in which politicians are typically cited in the news, which is with extremely short quotes (Rinke 2016). Finally, although complexity was manipulated, neither statement was overly complex, since the average political speech tends to be quite simple (Thoemmes and Conway 2007). Since highly complex speeches are a rarity in real-life politics, the study's "mundane realism"—that

is, the extent to which events occurring in the experiment are likely to occur in the “real world”—could be ensured even without exposing subjects to such stimuli.

DEPENDENT MEASURES AND COVARIATES

Information recall: Subjects were asked, after exposure, to write down in their own words up to six one-sentence arguments describing Candidate Miller’s position on immigration. These answers were coded post hoc for correctness, and a total recall score was computed by summing the number of correct arguments a subject was able to write. For example, in the low-complexity/Democratic candidate condition, arguments such as “illegal immigrants” and “solution to immigration” were not counted, since they do not convey any substantive information on the speaker’s stance, but arguments such as “legalize illegal immigrants” and “this solution will grow the economy” were coded as correct.

Persuasion: Subjects were asked how persuasive they found Candidate Miller’s speech to be on a 1–5 scale varying from “definitely not persuasive” to “definitely persuasive.” This measure was substantiated in previous persuasion studies (O’Keefe 2002; Chong and Druckman 2007). A second measure of persuasiveness asked participants to rate, again on a 1–5 scale, the degree to which they agree with the position advocated by the speaker. The two questions were averaged to form a persuasion scale ranging from 1 to 5 ($\alpha = 0.84$).

The study’s covariates included relevant demographic and political variables. Online Appendix D presents full question wording for all items, and Online Appendix E presents descriptive statistics and a correlation matrix for all study variables.

PRELIMINARY CHECKS

Manipulation checks revealed that subjects in all six conditions perceived speeches as intended, in terms of both the number of dimensions of a topic the speech included (differentiation) and the inclusion of a trade-off between dimensions (integration). Additional preliminary checks showed that random assignment to groups was successful and that the complexity manipulation did not alter the perceived ideology of the speaker. Full results of these preliminary checks are presented in Online Appendix F.

ANALYSIS STRATEGY

To test the study’s hypotheses, a series of regression models predicting the outcome variables as a function of both experimental factors were estimated. Since in a post-test design such as this one, attitude change per person is

unobservable, the study operationalizes recall and persuasion effects not as individual deviations from a baseline value, but as mean differences between treatment groups. Thus, a confirmation of the study's hypotheses will take the form of significant post-test differences between groups. In both experiments, the high-complexity condition was chosen as the reference category to which the two other complexity conditions are compared. This was done because the complex condition was expected to differ from both other conditions on both outcomes, while the low- and moderate-complexity conditions were not expected to differ.²

Results

Information: Model 1 in [table 1](#) reports a negative binomial regression predicting the number of arguments recalled by subjects as a function of rhetorical complexity and source partisanship.³ A negative binomial regression is recommended for modeling count data with over-dispersion (i.e., when the variance of the dependent variable is larger than its mean), such as the recall variable used here ([King 1989](#)). As the negative coefficients for the low- and moderate-complexity conditions indicate, significantly more arguments were recalled in the high-complexity condition than in both other conditions. The log count of recall decreases by 0.26 in the low-complexity condition and by 0.37 in the moderate-complexity condition, both compared to the high-complexity condition. The latter finding is especially noteworthy: Even though the moderate- and high-complexity conditions included the same two perspectives on the issue and were similar in length and readability, subjects recalled the highest number of arguments from the most complex speech. The difference between the low- and moderate-complexity conditions was not significant.

The main effect of source partisanship, also tested in Model 1, is insignificant, indicating that average recall did not differ across partisan conditions. Of more interest, however, are the interaction terms between complexity and source partisanship, shown in Model 2. Both terms are insignificant, suggesting that the effects of complexity on recall do not differ as a function of the partisan identity of the speaker.

Persuasion: Model 3 in [table 1](#) is an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression predicting speech persuasiveness as a function of rhetorical complex-

2. Even though the empirical expectations for persuasion in Experiment 2 are different, the high-complexity condition remained the reference group in that experiment for the sake of consistency. Online Appendix I presents the results of both experiments with the *low*-complexity condition as the reference category. The study's conclusions remain unchanged.

3. Online Appendix G presents the effects of all covariates on both dependent variables in both experiments.

Table 1. Negative binomial and OLS regressions predicting recall and persuasion: illegal immigration experiment

	Recall				Persuasion			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>b</i>	(SE)
Low-complexity condition	-0.26**	(0.1)	-0.32*	(0.13)	-0.2*	(0.09)	-0.27*	(0.13)
Moderate-complexity condition	-0.37**	(0.1)	-0.37**	(0.14)	-0.32**	(0.09)	-0.34**	(0.13)
Source partisanship (1 = Democrat)	-0.10	(0.08)	-0.14	(0.13)	-0.26**	(0.07)	-0.33*	(0.13)
Low-complexity × Democrat			0.13	(0.19)			0.14	(0.18)
Moderate-complexity × Democrat			-0.01	(0.19)			0.05	(0.18)
Constant	0.39**	(0.08)	0.41**	(0.09)	3.48**	(0.07)	3.51**	(0.09)
Pseudo R ² /R ²	0.01		0.01		0.03		0.03	
<i>N</i>	947		947		925		925	

NOTE.—Entries in Models 1 and 2 are negative binomial regression coefficients; in Models 3 and 4, entries are OLS regression coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses in all models. The high-complexity condition is the reference group in all models.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

ity and source partisanship.⁴ Speeches in the high-complexity condition are found to be significantly more persuasive than speeches in low- and moderate-complexity conditions, with decreases of 0.2 and 0.32 units (on a 1–5 scale), respectively. The main effect of partisanship in this model is negative and significant, suggesting that respondents lean toward the Republican stance on illegal immigration.

The interactions between experimental factors, presented in Model 4, are both insignificant. This suggests that for persuasion, too, the effects of complexity hold across partisan conditions. As the mean persuasion scores in each condition, reported in [table 2](#), show, the pattern of the persuasion effect is highly similar across partisan conditions, a result in line with the argument that when an issue is two-sided in nature, integrating a counterargument increases overall persuasion. These differences are plotted in the lower panel of [figure 2](#).

As a final test, the interaction between speech complexity, source partisanship, and subject partisanship was estimated to test whether the effects of complexity on persuasion are stronger (or weaker) when the source and the subject share partisan identity. To do so, a binary variable was constructed that received the value 1 when the source and the subject shared party identification and 0 when they did not. The model testing these interactions, reported in Online Appendix H, shows that, as one would expect, a message from a copartisan is more persuasive than a message from a candidate from the outparty ($b = 0.41, p < 0.01$). As for the interactions, the low-complexity on copartisanship interaction is insignificant ($b = -0.11, p > 0.1$), while the moderate-complexity on copartisanship interaction is positive and significant ($b = 0.58, p < 0.01$). The former result shows that copartisanship does not alter the effects of low (versus high) complexity, and the latter result indicates that a moderately complex speech is more persuasive when it comes from a copartisan.

EXPERIMENT 1 DISCUSSION

The results of Experiment 1 indicate that when elite communication differentiates and integrates dimensions of an issue, citizens remember it better and are more persuaded by it. These results are robust, as they hold regardless of the partisan identity of the speaker and the ideological content he presents.

The three-level complexity manipulation employed here suggests that the mere inclusion of multiple perspectives on an issue does not increase the informative and persuasive power of a message. Rather, it shows that the effects of complexity stem from the integrative nature of the high-complexity speeches. The results on message recall suggest that when a speaker

4. Running ordered logit models produces substantively identical results to all OLS models reported in this article. Moreover, as Online Appendix J shows, the results for persuasion remain the same when using the “agreement” item, which more directly measures support for a position (rather than an evaluation of the message), as the dependent variable.

Table 2. Mean recall and persuasion by experimental group, experiments 1 and 2

	Recall				Persuasion			
	Democrat		Republican		Democrat		Republican	
	<i>M</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>M</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>M</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>M</i>	(<i>SE</i>)
Experiment 1								
Low complexity	1.08	(0.11)	1.09	(0.11)	3.06	(0.09)	3.25	(0.09)
Moderate complexity	0.89	(0.09)	1.04	(0.1)	2.9	(0.09)	3.17	(0.09)
High complexity	1.30	(0.13)	1.50	(0.13)	3.19	(0.10)	3.51	(0.08)
Experiment 2								
Low complexity	1.21	(0.10)	0.90	(0.08)	3.91	(0.07)	3.21	(0.09)
Moderate complexity	1.14	(0.10)	0.92	(0.08)	3.63	(0.08)	3.13	(0.09)
High complexity	1.60	(0.12)	1.13	(0.1)	3.63	(0.07)	3.26	(0.09)

NOTE.—Entries are marginal means with standard errors in parentheses.

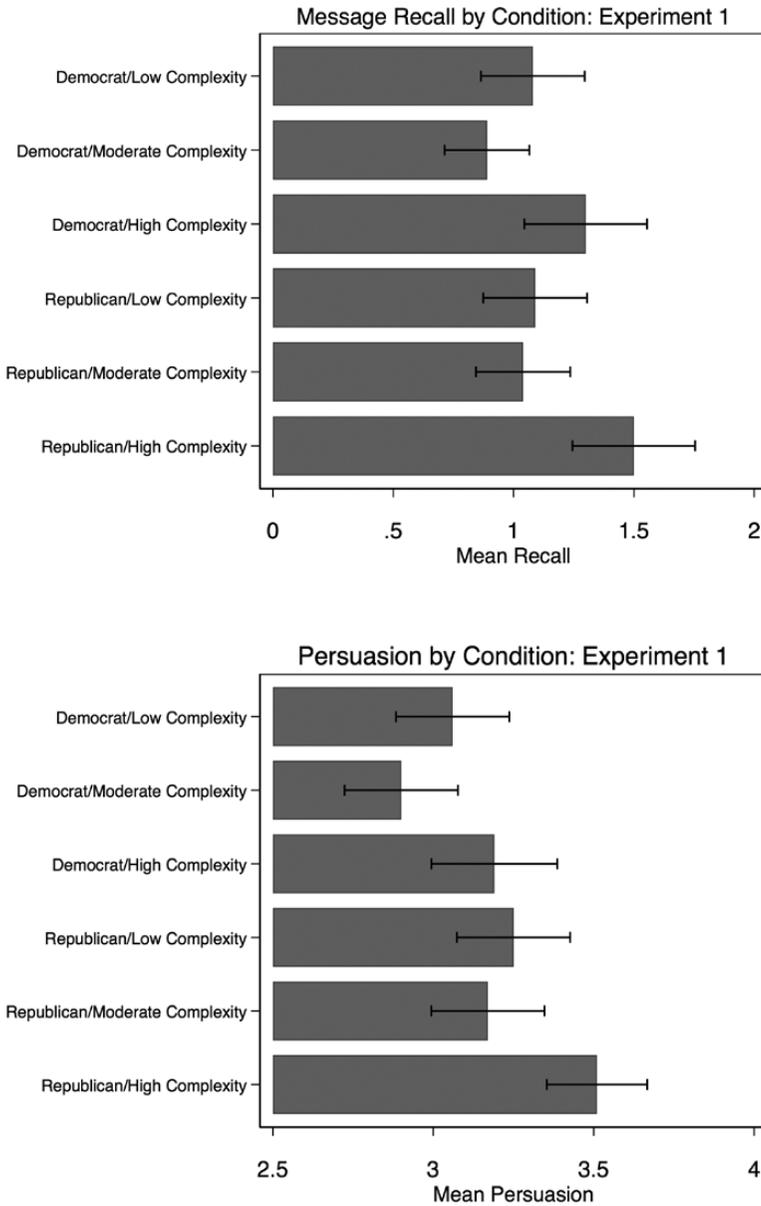


Figure 2. Mean recall and persuasion by experimental condition: experiment 1. Error bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

meaningfully connects two dimensions of an issue, people find it easier to retrieve both dimensions from memory. This contradicts the cognitive principle positing that simple information is easier for people to learn, but it is in line with studies showing that the introduction of higher-order connections between different bits of political information enhances message learning (e.g., [Eveland 2001](#)).

In terms of persuasion, on a polarizing issue, an integrative two-sided message appears to receive more public support in both Democratic/liberal and Republican/conservative contexts. One likely possibility is that people respond positively to communications congruent with their prior beliefs ([Taber and Lodge 2006](#)). On a two-sided issue, complex messages that take two conflicting views into account seem to increase the pool of citizens who can identify with the message. A related possibility is that on controversial issues, politicians pay a price for ignoring the opinions of voters from the other side of the issue but earn points when their statements signal flexibility ([Page 1976](#)).

Experiment 2: Paid Leave

The second experiment was conducted April 24–28, 2017. A sample of 1,072 American adults was recruited from the online panel of Qualtrics.⁵ As Online Appendix B shows, the two experiments are similar in terms of sample composition and closely resemble national census data. The complexity manipulation in the paid-leave experiment followed the same logic as the illegal immigration experiment. In the low-complexity condition, the speaker only mentioned one perspective to support his position; in the moderate-complexity condition, he included two perspectives but they were unrelated; and in the high-complexity condition, he mentioned the same two perspectives, but this time integrated them by saying that both should be balanced when making a decision.

Even though paid leave is not a strongly partisan issue, it is logical to expect a Democrat to be more supportive of paid leave than a Republican. Based on this distinction, a 3×2 between-subjects design, similar to that of Experiment 1, was employed. The full stimulus material used in this experiment is presented in Online Appendix C. As this appendix shows, the complexity manipulation was constructed to be as similar as possible across studies, using an identical structure of arguments and similar text length and readability. Online Appendix D presents full question wording, and Online Appendix E includes descriptive statistics and a correlation matrix for all study variables.

5. The completion rate in Experiment 2 was 33.5 percent. Among the 3,204 respondents who logged into the survey, 1,072 completed it and 2,132 were excluded either because they did not complete the survey or because their demographic quota categories (age and gender) already had been filled.

Finally, just as in Experiment 1, manipulation checks (fully reported in Online Appendix F) were all successful.

Results

Information: Model 1 in [table 3](#) displays the results of a negative binomial regression predicting the number of arguments recalled by subjects as a function of speech complexity and source partisanship. As in Experiment 1, people recalled more arguments in the high-complexity condition than in both the low and moderate conditions. The log-counts of the differences are -0.26 and -0.28 , respectively, and both effects are significant at the 99 percent level. Here, as in Experiment 1, the low- and moderate-complexity conditions do not differ in memorability, and the interaction terms between complexity and source partisanship (presented in Model 2) are insignificant, indicating once more that the effect of complexity on recall holds across partisan conditions. Mean recall scores in Experiment 2 are displayed in [table 2](#) and plotted in the upper panel of [figure 3](#). The similar pattern and size of the recall effects obtained in Experiments 1 and 2 constitute strong evidence that the observed effect is consistent, and that the manipulation was carried out similarly in both experiments.

Persuasion: An OLS regression predicting speech persuasiveness,⁶ presented in Model 3 in [table 3](#), finds no significant difference in persuasion between the high-complexity condition and either of the two other conditions. When changing the reference group in the model from high to low complexity, however, the difference between the low- and moderate-complexity conditions is significant ($b = -0.19$, $p < 0.05$), which signals that on paid leave, a simple message is more persuasive than a moderately complex message.⁷ In addition, the main effect of source partisanship in Model 3 is positive and significant, indicating that the public leans toward the Democratic stance on paid leave.

Next, Model 4 tests the interactions between experimental factors. In this model, the interaction between low-complexity and source partisanship is positive and significant, indicating that when the source of the speech on paid leave is a Democrat—but not when he is a Republican—a simple message *increases* persuasion. The lower panel of [figure 3](#) plots message persuasiveness across conditions in Experiment 2. Unlike Experiment 1, an utterly different persuasion pattern appears in each partisan condition. When the speaker is a Democrat, who, in this case, communicates the consensus position (pro-paid leave), simplicity is the most persuasive. However, when the speaker is a Republican, who communicates the minority position (anti-paid leave), no

6. The reliability score for the persuasion scale in this experiment was $\alpha = 0.83$.

7. The full model is reported in [table I2](#) in Online Appendix I.

Table 3. Negative binomial and OLS regressions predicting recall and persuasion recall and persuasion: paid leave experiment

	Recall				Persuasion			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)
Low-complexity condition	-0.26**	(0.08)	-0.22	(0.13)	0.12	(0.08)	-0.05	(0.12)
Moderate-complexity condition	-0.28**	(0.09)	-0.21	(0.13)	-0.07	(0.08)	-0.13	(0.12)
Source partisanship (1 = Democrat)	0.29**	(0.07)	0.35**	(0.12)	0.52**	(0.07)	0.37**	(0.11)
Low-complexity × Democrat			-0.06	(0.17)			0.33*	(0.16)
Moderate-complexity × Democrat			-0.13	(0.17)			0.13	(0.16)
Constant	0.15*	(0.07)	0.12	(0.09)	3.19**	(0.07)	3.26**	(0.08)
Pseudo R ² /R ²	0.01		0.01		0.06		0.06	
<i>N</i>	1,072		1,072		1,063		1,063	

NOTE.—Entries in Models 1 and 2 are negative binomial regression coefficients; in Models 3 and 4, entries are OLS regression coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses in all models. The high-complexity condition is the reference group in all models.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

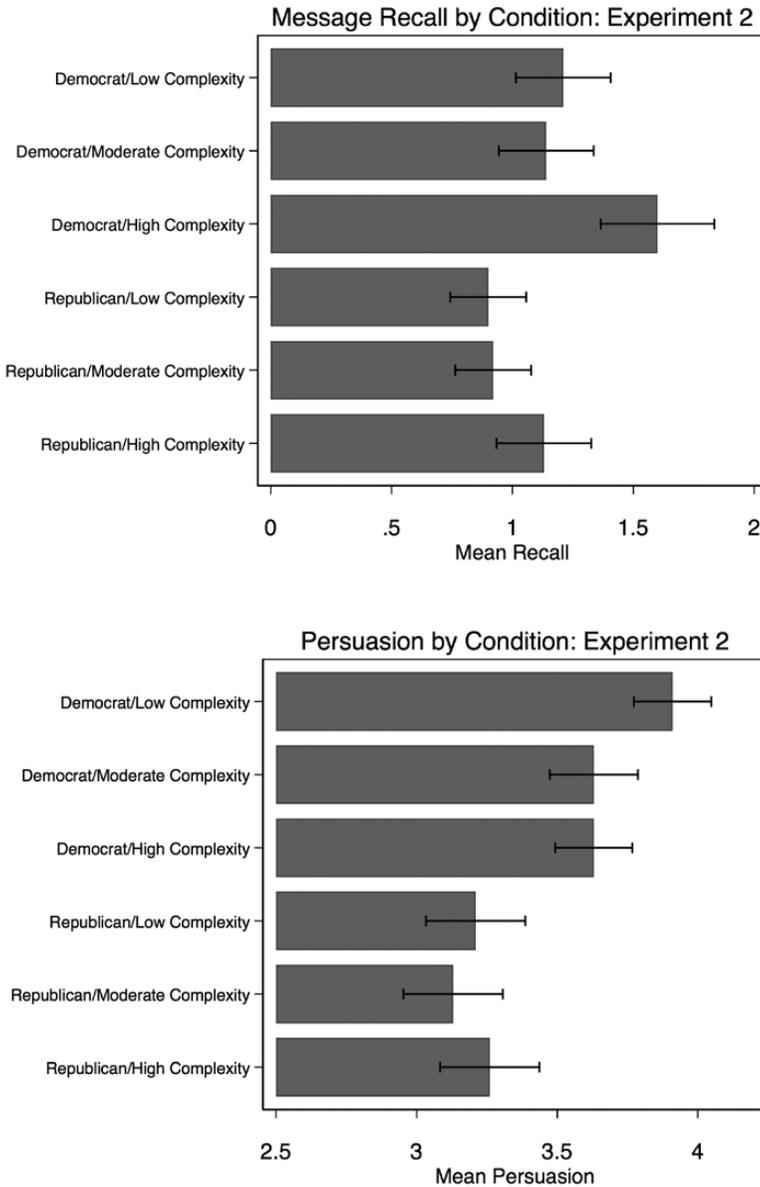


Figure 3. Mean recall and persuasion by experimental condition: experiment 2. Error bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

effect of complexity on persuasion is observed. These patterns are in line with the argument that both the issue being discussed and the position being advocated matter for the persuasive effect of complexity. Finally, in this study, no

interaction effects between complexity and copartisanship were observed (see Online Appendix H).

The conditional effect of complexity: To formally assess the hypothesis that on a contentious issue, complex rhetoric is more persuasive, while on a consensus issue, simple rhetoric is more effective, a combined analysis of the two experiments was performed. To conduct this test, the datasets from both experiments were merged and a binary variable indicating the issue under discussion was constructed (1 = illegal immigration and 0 = paid leave). Next, persuasion was regressed on complexity, on the aforementioned issue indicator, and on their interaction. As the persuasion model in [table 4](#) shows, both interaction terms are negative and significant, indicating that simplicity decreases persuasion on a contentious issue (illegal immigration) and increases it on a consensus issue (paid leave). When tested differently, the interaction of a *simple* rhetoric variable (1 = low-complexity condition) versus both other conditions combined is also negative and significant ($b = -0.21, p < 0.05$), showing again that simple elite communication increases persuasion only on a consensus issue. These results suggest that, as my theory predicts, the persuasive effect of complexity depends on both the issue being discussed (contentious vs. consensus) *and* the position being advocated (majority vs. minority).⁸

EXPERIMENT 2 DISCUSSION

Experiment 2 manipulated complexity and speaker partisanship in a similar way to Experiment 1, but exposed subjects to speeches on an issue on which public opinion is not divided. The experiment replicated the effect of complexity on message recall found in Experiment 1, lending further support for the conclusion that for a political message to be more memorable, it is insufficient for speakers to differentiate points of view. Instead, they should introduce a meaningful connection between the different dimensions they mention.

For persuasion, however, the results of Experiment 2 are different from those obtained in Experiment 1. Unlike its effect on recall, rhetorical complexity does not contribute to persuasion regardless of context. In the paid-leave experiment, integrating arguments did not contribute to persuasion in any of the conditions. Instead, a one-sided message was *more* persuasive than a two-sided message (either moderately or highly complex), but only when the speaker was a Democrat delivering a liberal message. I attribute this interaction to the nature of the issue under discussion. As public opinion data ([Pew Research Center 2017](#)) and my own tests (Online Appendix A) show, American public opinion is not strongly divided on the issue of paid leave. It seems that on a relatively consensual issue, simple rhetoric is effective at swaying public

8. The combined test was also conducted for the recall effects (see the recall model in [table 4](#)). Both interactions for recall are insignificant, which is in line with the study's expectation to observe similar recall effects across partisan conditions and across studies.

Table 4. The effects of complexity conditional on issue

	Recall		Persuasion	
	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>b</i>	(SE)
Low-complexity condition	-0.25**	(0.09)	0.14	(0.08)
Moderate-complexity condition	-0.29**	(0.09)	-0.08	(0.08)
Issue (1 = Illegal Immigration)	0.03	(0.09)	-0.09	(0.09)
Low-complexity × Illegal immigration	-0.01	(0.13)	-0.34**	(0.12)
Moderate-complexity × Illegal immigration	-0.09	(0.13)	-0.25*	(0.12)
Constant	0.31**	(0.06)	3.45**	(0.06)
<i>N</i>	2,019		1,988	

NOTE.— Entries in the recall model are negative binomial regression coefficients; in the persuasion model, entries are OLS regression coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses in both models. The high-complexity condition is the reference group in both models.

p* < 0.05; *p* < 0.01

opinion, provided that the public is already on the speaker’s side and there is no prominent alternative perspective that needs to be taken into consideration.

General Discussion

While previous scholarship has thoroughly examined the political conditions predicting elites’ use of simple and complex communication, little empirical evidence exists on how these messages affect the public. The two experiments reported here address this question, focusing on the informative and persuasive power of simple and complex political rhetoric.

Both experiments find that citizens are better able to remember arguments from complex speeches, even though they were neither longer than speeches in both other conditions nor included more substantive information than speeches in the moderate-complexity condition. This result speaks directly to the scholarly discussion on the implications of simple elite communication for public opinion. While some scholars adopt a pessimistic tone and lament the “dumbing-down” of political speech and general decline of intellectualism in modern-era politics (Lim 2008), others are more positive and claim that simple rhetoric can contribute to democracy, since it is comprehensible to more citizens and, therefore, more inclusive (Spirling 2016). The current results support the former claim. Simple talk, whose prevalence in political elite communication is on the rise, seems to have detrimental consequences for citizens’ levels of information on issues. This result echoes deliberative democracy studies showing that when citizens receive full, balanced information on political issues, the accuracy and sophistication of their attitudes increase (Luskin, Fishkin, and Jowell 2002).

The second major finding of the study is that complexity matters for persuasion, but that this effect is conditional on the issue being discussed and the position the speaker is taking. Experiment 1 found that under a bimodal distribution of public opinion, using considerations from both sides of the issue increases message persuasiveness. Experiment 2, however, found that when the distribution of public opinion is unimodal, politicians' incentives to display simple rhetoric depend on voters' preferences.

This result can inform several bodies of literature dealing with the effectiveness of political communication. First, the results confirm that a correspondence between the considerations included in elite communication and the public's pre-existing preferences contributes to persuasion (Grose, Malhotra, and Van Houweling 2015; Tesler 2015). Taking relevant considerations on an issue into account seems to matter for voters who, in contrast to the intriguing results of some recent studies (Broockman and Butler 2017), do not necessarily adopt elite views regardless of justification. Second, the results expand the message-sidedness literature (O'Keefe 1999). In accordance with this line of research, a two-sided message is not more persuasive than a one-sided message across the board, but only when certain conditions are met. While the sidedness literature emphasizes the role of refuting counterarguments, this study points to the integration of an opposing argument as a mechanism that can increase persuasion, though only when the issue is contentious. Finally, the results are in line with the one experiment I am aware of that explored the effects of rhetorical complexity on citizens (Conway et al. 2012), which found no consistent "simplicity effect" for political rhetoric.

How generalizable are the results presented here? On the one hand, it is clear that this study is affected by the inherent weaknesses of the experimental design. For example, while I introduce speeches by a fictional candidate, in reality, prior evaluations of candidates likely interact with the content of their communications. Subjects also knew they were being studied, which may have introduced demand effects: They may have put more mental effort than usual into processing the experimental stimuli. This may be the case particularly for the more complex messages, which may have introduced a demand effect of wanting to appear sophisticated by preferring a complicated argument. Despite these limitations, the stimuli subjects encountered were as realistic as possible: Online platforms constitute a dominant way for citizens to get political information, and the speeches presented to subjects resemble the short and relatively simple nature of politicians' quotes in the news.

Some other limitations of the study should be mentioned before concluding. First, I investigate only two political issues. To draw general conclusions on the impact of simple rhetoric on public opinion, more issues need to be studied. The second limitation concerns the conceptualization of complexity. While I explore the impact of integrative complexity, the role of other dimensions of complex communication, such as the use of abstract language or intricate syntactic structures, is not explored here. Third, this investigation only

measures attitudes post-test, which does not allow me to estimate the degree of individual attitude change. Finally, the study taps short-term communication effects, which may be stronger than long-term effects (Chong and Druckman 2010).

Despite these limitations, this research takes an important first step toward untangling the complex effects of simple elite communication on the public. Since politicians' use of simple rhetoric varies substantially across time and context, studying the consequences of this phenomenon is essential.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are freely available at *Public Opinion Quarterly* online.

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