

The Trouble with Voters... and Those Who Try to Fix Them

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The Trouble with Voters...

- + The trouble with voters is that they seem not to know very much.
- + When we ask them questions on a wide range political topics, they rarely give correct answers.

Questioning Your Competence

- + What majority is required for the U.S. Senate to override a presidential veto -- $1/2+1$, $3/5$, $2/3$ or $3/4$?
- + Which of the two major political parties is more conservative in general?
- + Who is the Attorney General of the United States?

A Familiar Plan

- + Improve citizen competence.

- + Means: Persuasion

- + Theory:

- + “If we tell them what we know, they will change what they do.”

Proposition

For voter education campaigns,
failure is the norm.

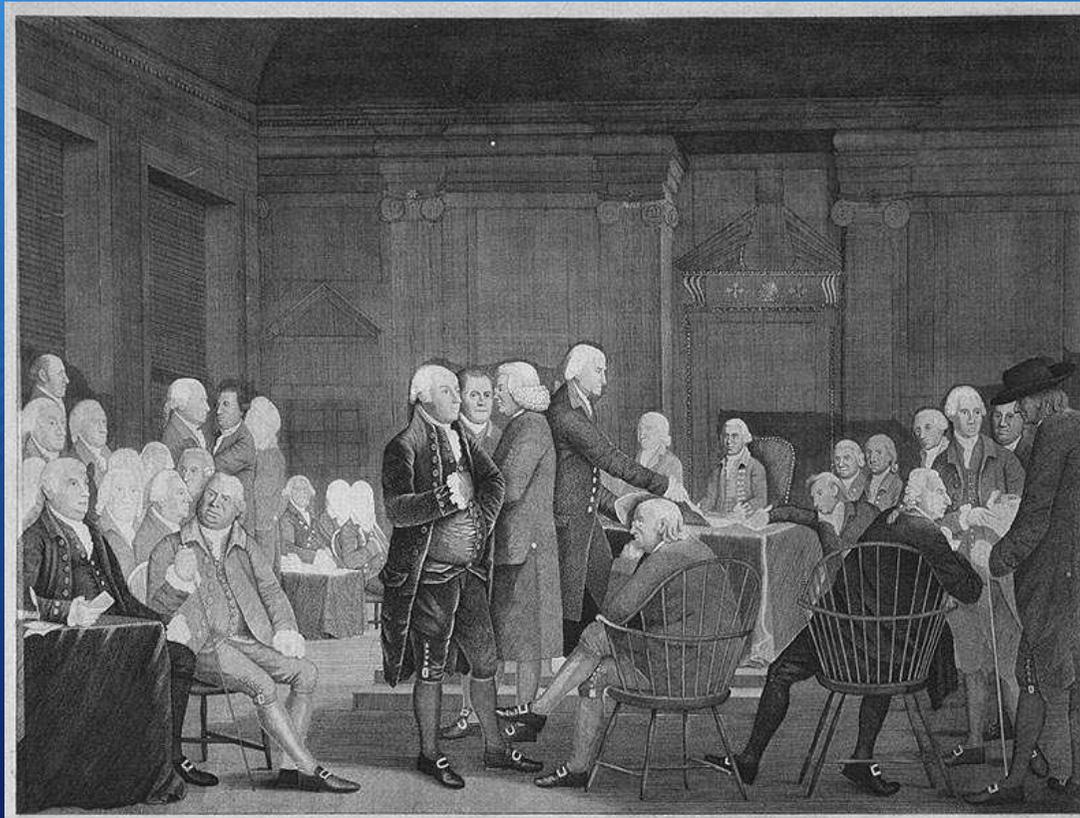
The consequences are **tragic**.

BASIC PREMISE

+ The problem is not “them,”

+ The problem is “us.”

One view of "us"



One view of “them”

Our target audience is

ignorant

lazy

apathetic.



The Trouble with Fixers

- + "We"

 - + *Lack important information*

 - + *Misdiagnose* voter competence/incompetence

 - + Design *ineffective and inefficient* competence-improvement schemes

- + Can we fix the fixers?

Guidelines

+ **Biology** defines possibilities.

+ **Social scientific studies of persuasion** reveal requirements for success.



Binary Choice

A Common Circumstance for Voters

Questioning Your Competence

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Breakdown: Technical

- + I define competence with respect to a task.
 - + How correct must you be?
- + Example:
 - + make a binary choice.
 - + Write a constitution.
- + A voter is competent if:
 - + She makes the same choice she would have made given different (e.g., more) information.



Chimp Odds

# voters	Probability of correct majority decision
1	.51
305	.61
1 million	.9999
10 million	.9999...

Questions

- + Is a voter less competent than a chimp with a coin?
- + Q. What would it take to improve voter competence?
 - + A. Persuasion is necessary.



Necessary Conditions for Persuasion

Necessary Conditions for Persuasion

+ Attention

+ Elaboration

+ Credibility



ATTENTION!

The Battle for Attention

- WM has a **very limited capacity** (Baddeley: 7 ± 2)
- WM has a **high decay rate** (for most stimuli, $< 1\text{ms}$).
- To win, the carrying utterance must:
 - imply large Δ in pleasure or pain (**urgency**)
 - prevail over proximate others

What will you remember?



What will you remember?



What will you remember?



What will you remember?



What will you remember?

- If we try very hard, we can reconstruct only tiny fragments of life events.
- Even chunks that seem very important at the time or to others.
- Implication: What a target audience remembers may not be what you want it to remember.



B. Elaboration

Think about it...

The Battle for Elaboration

- + Attention provides an opportunity to leave a **cognitive legacy**.
 - Δ relevant activation potentials is not automatic.
- Δ LTM requires elaboration.
 - Perceptions of urgency and efficacy fuel cognitive effort.
- Chunks leave a legacy if perceived as **unique and highly relevant**.

Climate Example

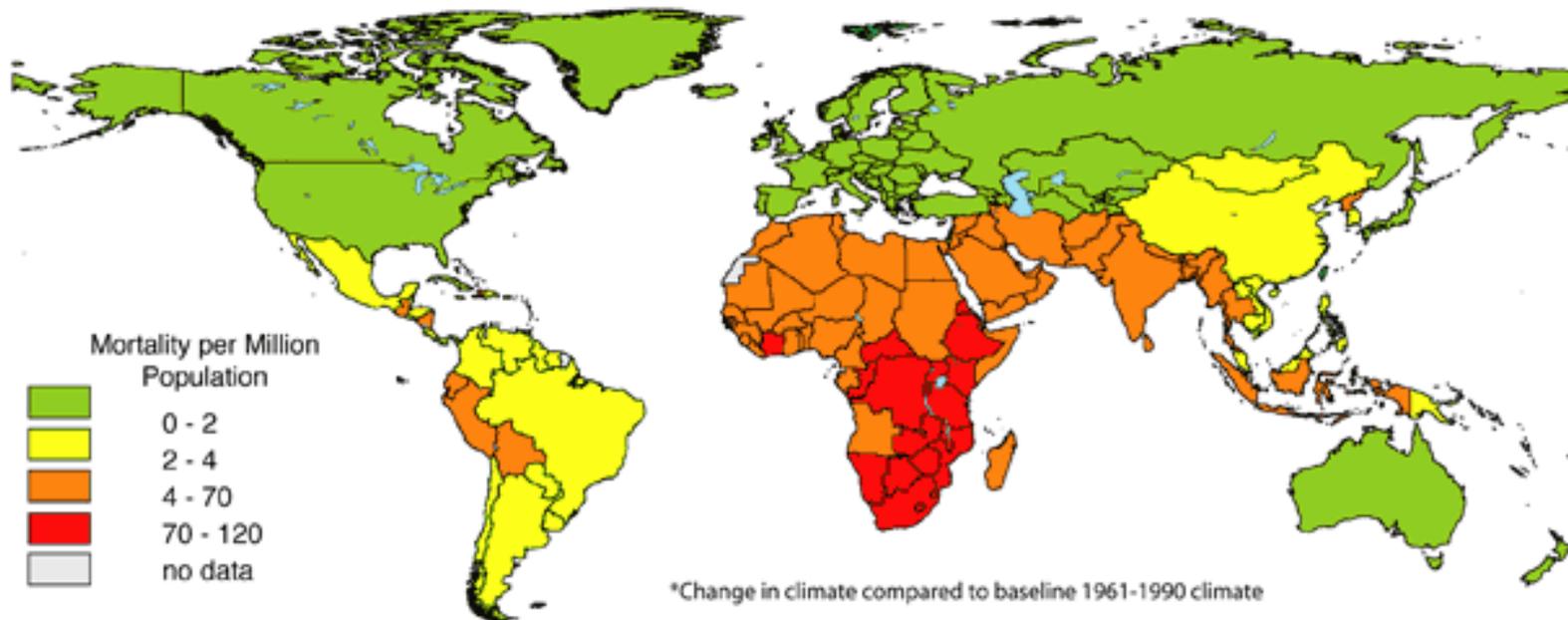
- To most citizens,
- The benefits of reducing emissions are: distant / abstract / uncertain
- The costs of lifestyle change are: immediate / concrete / certain

Ride your bike. Save this bear?



Green Europe!

Estimated Deaths Attributed to Climate Change in the Year 2000, by Subregion*



Data Source:

McMichael, JJ, Campbell-Lendrum D, Kovats RS, et al. Global Climate Change. In Comparative Quantification of Health Risks: Global and Regional Burden of Disease due to Selected Major Risk Factors. M. Ezzati, Lopez, AD, Rodgers A., Murray CJL. Geneva, World Health Organization, 2004



Maps produced by the Center for Sustainability and the Global Environment (SAGE)

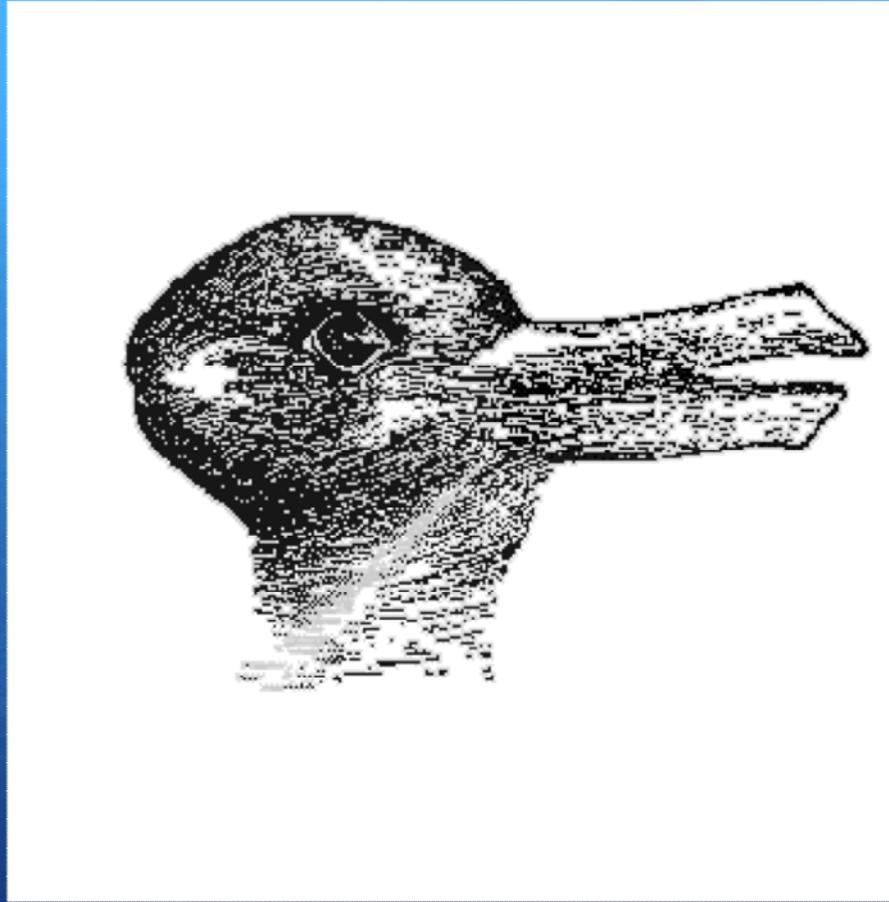
Increasing Your Odds of Winning

- Make it “local”
- Make its consequences concrete and immediate
- Make the desired outcome possible to achieve through actions that the audience can imagine taking



C. Credibility

Believe it or Not...Its Essential



A Challenge...

- "duck"

...in the Political Context

- Politics entails conflicts not easily resolved.
- It yields **language indeterminacy** with a nasty edge.
 - Words have multiple meanings.
 - Meanings are context-dependent.
 - Conflict **brings incentives to manipulate** context and meaning.
- Result: “communication games” with unusual incentives.
 - People have to work harder to learn.
 - Persuasion requires **CREDIBILITY**

Math Class vs. Politics

- The front of the room is the center of attention.
- There are exams.
- Your most important choices are somewhat public.
- There is one teacher.

Math Class vs. Politics

- The front of the room is the center of attention.
- Exams.
- Important choices are somewhat public.
- There is one teacher.
- Relevant stimuli are in many places.
- No exams.
- Important choices are private.
- Competing views are expected.

Credibility

- ✘ For contested issues, high credibility is a must.
- ✘ Credibility is domain-specific and is bestowed by the audience.
- ✘ Credibility is a function of
 - + Source attributes*
 - + Message attributes
 - + Contextual attributes*
 - + Audience effects*

Implications

- + Many “experts” overestimate their persuasive powers.
 - + That change should occur does not mean that it will.
- + “Audiences” have reasons for what they do.
 - + “Real” beats “ideal”
- + Information transmission is not competence transmission.
 - + One is trivial, the other is not.



Thank You
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