

Verbal and Nonverbal Modality Effects on Impressions of Political Candidates

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Abstract

The experiment examined the role of presentation modality in evaluations of George Bush and Al Gore from the Presidential debates in the 2000 campaign. In the experiment, 295 Japanese subjects were presented selected segments from the debate in either the normal audiovisual condition or in a visual-only condition. The results showed that candidates in audiovisual modality were rated more favorably than in visual-only modality. Bush was judged significantly more favorably than Gore in the visual-only modality than in the audiovisual modality. Gore was rated more leader-like than Bush.

Key Words and Phrases: presidential debate, visual modality, audiovisual modality

"Our public face is absolutely crucial, especially now. We need someone who's calm, confident and someone who looks like a regular American..." (1996, *Primary Colors*, Anonymous, p.141)

It is commonly assumed that various nonverbal cues, especially the visual ones are more important than verbal cues in affecting interpersonal judgments. Todorov et al. (2005) found that the more competent looking candidates in the Upper House in the US had significantly higher probability of winning the elections. Ozono et al. (2006) also found that candidates' faces predict election outcomes.

Early research found that the communication of the contents of speech depends on the verbal cues, while the communication of attitudes depends mostly on non-verbal cues (Argyle, Alkema, & Gilmour, 1972; Argyle, Salter, Nicholson, Williams, & Burgess, 1970; Mehrabian & Wiener, 1967). The examination of channel effects, including comparisons across modalities (e.g., visual vs. verbal vs. vocal) is important for understanding communication. In her review of visual primacy, Noller (1985) offered a number of observations regarding channel comparisons. Among them was a caution about the use of methodologies that are not related to real life situations and, consequently, would have limited generalizability (Noller, 1985). In addition, Noller emphasized that the encoders' expressiveness in different channels affects the relative importance of those channels. Fortunately, it is possible to address these two concerns identified by Noller.

One important area in which we make "real life" judgments of prominent encoders who vary in their expressiveness is in politics. Much of what the public knows of candidates comes from television appearances in which the visual information is prominent. In the presidential campaigns, a particularly important vehicle for the candidates is the televised presidential debate. Furthermore, the presidential debates provide one of the few occasions when the candidates appear together and may be compared directly. The first televised presidential debate, between Nixon and Kennedy in

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1960, was one in which the contrasting appearance and style of the candidates were very noticeable. Kennedy was an attractive figure who showed confidence and determination in his presentation. In contrast, Nixon had a five-o'clock shadow, was perspiring noticeably, and seemed ill at ease. Some analysts suggested that the debate and, in particular, the visual contrast between the candidates were critical in Kennedy's narrow election victory. A study by Exline (1985) of the first presidential debate in the 1976 campaign found that impressions of Carter and Ford were affected by the mode of presentation (printed speech, audio only, audiovisual). Research on political candidates suggests that visual appearance may be an important source of affective information. For example, in a study of one of the debates in the 1984 election between Reagan and Mondale, Reagan's advantage in rated expressiveness and physical attractiveness were maximized in the visual modality condition (Patterson, Churchill, Burger, & Powell, 1992). Because of the prominence of television in the political process, studying modality effects in the evaluation of candidates is a practical and important pursuit. Like the earlier studies of Krauss et al. (1981) and Exline (1985), we decided to use the televised debate format. Specifically, we examined a controlled comparison across modalities between Bush and Gore from segments of the presidential debates from the 2000 US election campaign.

Method

Criteria for selecting tape segments. The purpose of the selection of segments from the presidential debate was to obtain comparable samples of both Bush and Gore speaking on the same issues for a substantial period of time. Several criteria were applied in identifying those segments. These criteria evolved over a number of passes through the tape to determine what was possible to select. First, the camera had to be focused only on the candidate who was speaking. Most of these were head and shoulder shots, although some included full-length shots. This excluded those parts of the debate during which the camera focus might switch to a questioning panel member, the audience, or back to the other candidate. Second, the segments included only those periods during which both candidates talked about a specific and comparable issue. Third, the segments were approximately 40-50 seconds in length. Fourth, the total time across segments was equated for the candidates.

Within those constraints, two different segments from each of the candidates were selected. The editing process was determined by the shorter speaking turn that met the criteria listed. Thus, the turn of the candidate who spoke longer was edited to match that of his opponent and to match the overall speaking time. Overall, the segments for both candidates averaged 44 seconds and included the topics of foreign policy and the budget surplus. It should be emphasized that the selection and editing process was designed to identify, in a relatively objective manner, comparable speaker turns for each of the candidates. That is, the criteria were specifically independent of any attempt to select on the basis of the quality of the candidates' behavioral presentations. Consequently, these segments should be fairly representative of those longer speaker turns that were issue-oriented.

Participants. A total of 295 undergraduate participants (194 females and 101 males) from introductory psychology classes at an urban university and a college at Matue City and Izumo City participated in the study. Subjects were tested in small groups of one to seven persons. The data

were collected between of September 2000 and November of 2000, approximately seven to months after the debates occurred.

Procedure. In all the conditions, groups of one to seven subjects were seated facing the VCR and monitor. The chairs were arranged in a semi-circle about 4 feet from the monitor. A sign was posted on the monitor showing the order of the two issues on which the candidates would be speaking. In the visual condition, the picture was visible, but there was no audio. Subjects were informed that they were participating in a study on reactions to one of the 2000 Presidential debates.

There are two identical tapes made from presentations in the Democratic and Republican primaries back in February. Two general issues are sampled – foreign policy and the budget surplus. On one tape, the order of presentation is Bush-Gore-Gore-Bush and for the other it is Gore-Bush-Bush-Gore. So the two tapes control for order of presentation effects. That is, we can look at presentation order effects. There are also 2 orders for the ratings, one with Bush first and one with Gore first. Because we wanted to ask the subjects in the audiovisual condition how much they thought they understood an additional question was added to their ratings. Obviously, subjects in the visual-only condition did not get that question.

The instructions are as follows: We are conducting a study of people's impressions of the two major candidates in the U.S. Presidential election. We have two brief segments from both Governor George Bush and Vice-President Al Gore recorded during their primary campaigns last February. Depending on the particular tape order, subjects were told that you will see one segment with Bush (Gore), then two segments with Gore (Bush), and finally one more segment with Bush. The visual-only group was told that they would see the videotape with the sound turned off. They were asked to watch the presentation carefully and then they would be asked to rate their impressions of the candidates based on what they had seen. After these instructions were given, subjects consent to participate was requested and they were reminded that they could leave the experiment without affecting their credits. Finally they were reminded to watch (listen to) the presentation carefully. Before the videotape was started, they were asked if they had any questions. At the end of the videotape, subjects were asked to please finish all of the ratings. When everyone was finished, the rating sheets were collected, subjects were thanked for their participation, and they were asked not to talk to others about the study. When participants had completed this task, they were debriefed, thanked for their participation and dismissed.

Questionnaire. On the first two pages of the questionnaire, subjects rated the candidates' presentations on a series of 11-point bipolar descriptions (Appendix). They included the following scales: (1) uninformed-informed, (2) insincere-sincere, (3) not intelligent-intelligent, (4) unlikable-likeable, (5) not leader-like-leader-like, (6) weak-strong, (7) non-persuasive-persuasive, (8) lacked poise-poised. (9) unexpressive-expressive, and (10) unattractive-attractive. Finally, the subjects were asked to provide the following information: (1) gender; (2) age; (3) How interested are you in American politics and political campaigns?; (4) How much do you know about the candidates?; (5) Before you saw this videotape, which of the two candidates did you like better?; and for only the subjects in the audiovisual condition, (6) How much of what the candidates said did you understand? The ratings were counterbalanced so that one-half of the subjects in each condition rated Bush first and one-half rated Gore first.

Results

A factor analysis (promax) was computed separately on the Bush and Gore ratings. The first three eigenvalues for the Bush ratings were 4.55, 1.65, and .98, and for the Gore ratings, 4.17, 1.64, and .98. For both analyses, the scree test suggested the presence of two factors (Table 1, Table 2). Consequently, the ratings from each candidate were summed separately, yielding a lead-

Table 1
Bipolar Adjectives to Measure Impression of Bush

Bipolar adjectives	Loadings	
	F1	F2
insincere-sincere	.033	.386
uninformed-informed	-.251	.934
not intelligent-intelligent	.098	.678
unlikable-likeable	.123	.719
not leader-like-leader-like	.729	.175
weak-strong	.933	-.183
non-persuasive-persuasive	.836	.043
lacked poise-poised	.031	.537
unexpressive-expressive	.582	-.051
unattractive-attractive	.471	.348

Table 2
Bipolar Adjectives to Measure Impression of Gore

Bipolar adjectives	Loadings	
	F1	F2
insincere-sincere	.029	.404
uninformed-informed	-.125	.854
not intelligent-intelligent	.092	.556
unlikable-likeable	.163	.642
not leader-like-leader-like	.719	.075
weak-strong	.883	-.172
non-persuasive-persuasive	.888	-.006
lacked poise-poised	-.111	.456
unexpressive-expressive	.628	-.044
unattractive-attractive	.560	.243

ership score and a favorability score for both Bush and Gore. The leadership score consisted of the ratings of leader-like, strong, persuasive, and expressive. The favorability score consisted of the ratings of sincere, intelligent, likeable, and poised. Bush ratings and Gore ratings were both internally consistent, with coefficient alphas of .86 and .82, for Bush and Gore, respectively. The summed leadership scores and favorability scores of the candidates were analyzed in ANOVA.

Separate 2 (Modality) × 2 (Candidate) ANOVAs, with repeated measures on the candidate factor, were computed on the ratings of the leadership and favorability dimensions.

For rated leadership, there was no effect of Modality $F(1, 293) = 1.25, n.s.$ There was, however, a large Candidate effect, with Gore rated as significantly more leader-like than Bush, $F(1, 293) = 255.66, p < .0001$, and a Modality × Candidate interaction effect, $F(1, 293) = 4.51, p < .03$. For the latter effect, although Gore was rated as more leader-like than Bush in the both modalities, Gore's advantage was greater in the visual-only modality than in the audiovisual condition. The candidate means for rated leadership and favorability by modality are shown in Table 3, Figure 1, and Figure 2.

For rated favorability, there was a significant effect of Modality, with candidates in the audiovisual modality rated more as more favorable than in the visual-only modality, $F(1, 293) = 5.45, p < .02$. There was a near significant effect of Candidate, $F(1, 293) = 2.98, p < .08$, with a tendency to rate Bush as more favorable than Gore. There was also a Modality × Candidate interaction, $F(1, 293) = 6.18, p < .01$, with Bush was rated as more favorable than Gore in the visual-only modality, not in the audiovisual modality.

Table 3
Mean Rated Favorability and Leadership of Bush and Gore across Modality

Modality	Leadership		Favorability	
	Bush	Gore	Bush	Gore
Audiovisual ($n=147$)	24.52	34.13	30.74	31.12
Visual ($n=148$)	22.49	35.05	30.80	28.72

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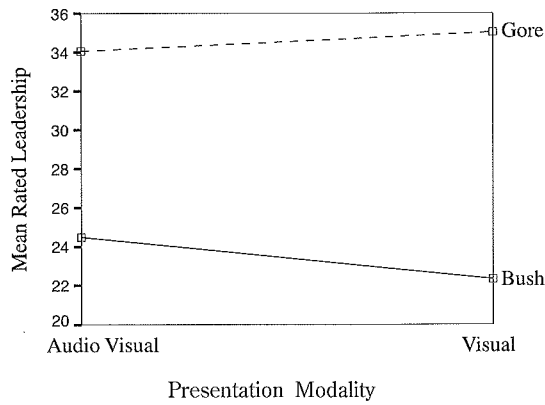


Figure 1. Mean rated leadership of Bush and Gore across presentation modality.

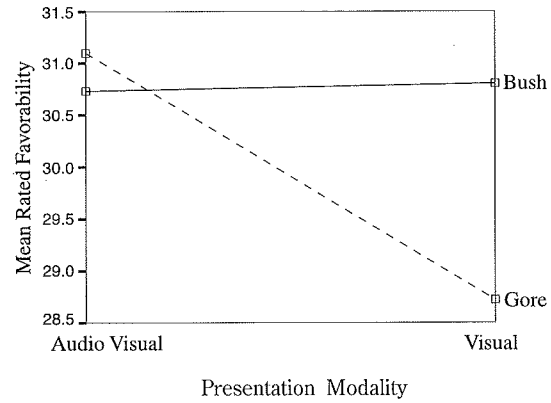


Figure 2. Mean rated favorability of Bush and Gore across presentation modality.

Means for post experimental ratings are as follows: 1. Interest in American politics and political campaigns: 4.8 ($SD = 2.61$) 2. How much do you know about the candidates: Bush 3.6 ($SD = 2.47$), Gore 3.4 ($SD = 2.44$) 3. Before you saw the videotape, which of the candidates did you like better?: Bush 51 (17.3%), Gore 62 (21%), none 176 (59.7%), 4. (For the audiovisual condition only) How much did you understand?: 2.4 (1.7) ($N = 146$)

Discussion

The results of the experiment showed a marginal, nonsignificant preference for Bush over Gore in rated favorability that was qualified by a Candidate \times Modality interactions. Specifically, Bush was rated as significantly more favorable than Gore in the visual-only modality, but not in the audiovisual modality. In contrast, in the leadership ratings, there was a large effect, with Gore rated much higher on leadership than Bush. This effect was qualified by Candidate \times Modality interaction, with Gore's leadership rating advantage greater in the visual-only modality than in the audiovisual modality. Thus, Bush was slightly higher in rated favorability, but Gore was much higher in rated leadership, and both of these differences were affected by presentation modality. It seems that the importance of presentation modality is dependent on a variety of factors (Noller, 1985). Although the apparent importance of the visual modality may not be as common as the early research suggested, it may be more common in politics, where "image" is such an important factor.

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Appendix (Questionnaire)

Please rate your impressions of the candidates based on the following 11-point scale. If you feel that the candidate very strongly merited the description on the left side of the scale, circle a 1. If you feel that the candidate very strongly merited the description on the right side of the scale, circle an 11. Intermediate numbers reflect varying degrees of the listed quality, with a 6 being midway between the two extremes. When you have completed the ratings turn the page and continue. Please complete each page before going on to the next page.

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BUSH SEEMED

Uninformed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Informed
Insincere	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Sincere
Not Intelligent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Intelligent
Unlikeable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Likeable
Not Leader-Like	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Leader-Like
Weak	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Strong
Non-Persuasive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Persuasive
Lacked Poise	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Poised
Unexpressive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Expressive
Unattractive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Attractive

GORE SEEMED

Uninformed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Informed
Insincere	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Sincere
Not Intelligent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Intelligent
Unlikeable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Likeable
Not Leader-Like	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Leader-Like
Weak	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Strong
Non-Persuasive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Persuasive
Lacked Poise	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Poised
Unexpressive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Expressive
Unattractive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Attractive

