

Verbal Sticks and Rhetorical Stones: Improving Conference Presentations in Political Science

David T Smith, *University of Sydney*

Rob Salmond, *University of Michigan*

ABSTRACT We provide advice to presenters at political science conferences. Our advice is based on the idea that the goal of a professional presentation is to provide an audience with information it can understand, discuss, and remember. We argue that current presentational norms in our discipline are counterproductive, and we encourage presenters to make their presentations more constrained, less technical, and more connected to the political world outside of political science.

Professional meetings are crucial to the enterprise of political science. They are where ideas go for graduation, counseling, makeovers, and surgery. They are also where new and emerging scholars can most easily showcase their analytical wares to the profession. Political scientists, sometimes more than 7,000 at a time, fly in from around the world to gather at our biggest conferences and swap ideas. Each presenter spends countless hours conducting his or her analysis and preparing his or her contributions, whether research papers, discussant advice, or roundtable comments. Conferences are the town square of political science.

Sadly, however, the standards of presentation at these conferences do not do justice to either the presentations' context or their content. They are often cobbled together, hurried, boring, poorly targeted, confusing, and otherwise ill-conceived. This state of affairs is due not only to presentations' lack of focus, but also to a set of counterproductive professional norms that have developed in our discipline.

Some may feel this assessment to be too harsh. For those people, we present a status quo parable, based on our experience attending large political science conferences.

PROFESSOR AARDVARK'S PACIFIC ADVENTURE

Professor Aardvark puts up a slide replicating the pdf title page of his coauthored paper: "Consociational Stasis and the Path to Sovereignty: Findings from an Isolated Laboratory." A few audience members lean forward, squinting to read the 12-point font from

David T Smith is a lecturer in American politics and foreign policy at the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney and also lectures in the department of government and international relations. His research interests are American and comparative political development and religion and politics. He can be reached at david.smith@sydney.edu.au.

Rob Salmond is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Michigan and a faculty associate at the Center for Political Studies. His research interests are comparative political behavior and comparative democratic institutions. He can be reached at rsalmond@umich.edu.

20 feet away. After introducing himself, Aardvark spends a minute recognizing his coauthors and thanking them for their various contributions.

He separates the relevant literature into the "Lijphartian Consociational" and "Horowitzian Electoralist" schools, spending five minutes laying out the core elements of each school's substantive proposal. The elements of each proposal fly onto the screen one at a time as Aardvark discusses them, although he misremembers the order of the flying bullets and has to go back to earlier points a couple of times. He then recognizes five authors who have recently advanced the work in each school, summarizing their work and scanning the audience in case they are present.

After this initial 10 minutes, Aardvark reveals the question that the paper addresses: What has been happening recently in New Caledonia, and how does this experience help us understand consociationalism? He also reveals his plan for the remainder of the 15-minute talk.

Professor Aardvark then presents his formal model of consociational decision-making, represented by three utility functions for different groups in society. Although the formulas contain many common elements, each is presented on the screen so that the presentation is comprehensive. Members of the audience again crane their necks, trying to read the subscripts. After explaining the moving parts in the models, a process consuming five minutes, Aardvark presents his five hypotheses.

As Aardvark is putting up his next slide about the recent history of New Caledonia, the chair leans over and whispers that he has two minutes left in his time slot. Aardvark-then-talks-much-more-rapidly-during-the-next-slide-rushing-his-points-in-the-process before returning to his normal pace after changing slides again, to the first of three setting out his data collection strategy, data sources, and empirical model.

Now, 20 minutes into the talk, the punchline arrives: a full table of regression results. Results! This time nobody makes an effort to read the small, technical type. "As you can see," Aardvark says, "the coefficient on the INDP_PREF variable is very stable.

SUR estimations, not shown on the table, provide support for this primary conclusion . . .”

The chair again whispers (not wanting to embarrass Aardvark by announcing it loudly) that his time is really very nearly up. Aardvark-then-speeds-through-the-next-slide-of-robustness-checks before again returning to his normal pace to discuss his final slide. This slide presents his five conclusions, which range from the performance of INDP_PREF to the goodness-of-fit of his empirical models.

Thirty minutes after standing up, Professor Aardvark sits down. The chair announces that, sadly, there is no time for Q&A on this panel. The audience wakes up and wanders off. They have learned nothing.

Although the substance of the previous paper is fictional, we have observed each of these myriad stylistic problems multiple times in presentations at political science conferences. Some of the problems are so common as to be unremarkable and have simply become part of the culture. Nonetheless, they continue to erect barriers between presenters and their audiences, making it more difficult for audiences to become informed about new scholarship, and for presenters to receive feedback on their work. These problems include:

- Overly technical, uninformative titles
- Discussing material not directly relevant to the paper’s content
- Unnecessarily long literature reviews
- Using proper names as markers for theoretical positions
- Convoluted conclusions
- Unnecessary technical clutter in the oral presentation or on the screen
- Unreadable text on slides
- Poorly animated slides
- Fast-talking-as-a-way-to-cope-with-running-out-of-time
- Presenting more than 15 minutes worth of material in 15 minutes
- Failing to respect time limits
- Weak-willed chairs who avoid confronting errant presenters at all costs
- Chairs who provide inadequate time signals to help presenters keep to time limits

We believe that some of these problems stem from a lack of instruction or helpful resources. Although we are all familiar with various manuals and handbooks for helping novices with academic writing, there are almost no equivalents that offer guidance for academic speech. We hope to provide the beginnings of a remedy for this situation here.

Across two articles, we provide advice for new and not-so-new presenters about getting the basics of a conference presentation right. We focus on giving the audience a discernable taste of the presenter’s research that entices listeners to discover more on their own. Our watchwords are “clarity,” “simplicity,” and “audience focus.” In this article, we concentrate on content selection and delivery in a conference presentation, while the subsequent article “Cheating Death-by-PowerPoint” tackles the issue of visual aids.

It is worth noting that there is almost no scientific literature on the comparative effectiveness of conference presentations, which again poses a stark contrast to the abundance of works that

investigate written academic language and what makes it work. Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas (2005) note that there is a profound mismatch between the importance of spoken academic language and the amount of attention that academics have actually given to it. Conferences play a critical role in the research process, and the conference presentation is a genre of communication that all scholars must learn and master. The conference presentation is very different from both everyday speech and academic writing, but academic speech has proven difficult to study.

This gap is part of a broader problem in the scientific study of persuasive speech in general. This field has a long tradition, from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* onwards, of trying to codify what makes persuasive speech effective, and beginning in the 1950s, psychologists and other scholars (e.g., Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1953) have attempted to replicate the intuitive findings of classical rhetoricians using experimental methods. This audacious research agenda has unfortunately been disappointing, producing a mass of weak, inconsistent, and contradictory findings (see Billig 1989). Although linguists and psychologists have discovered much about the regularities of persuasive speech, they have found little that can be used for instructive purposes. According to one survey of the literature, “We are not much better at predicting and advising the functional orator today than we were 2,500 years ago” (Quinn et al. 1991).

With all of these thoughts in mind, in this article we adopt a similar approach to that used by Steven Beebe and Susan Beebe in their now-classic text, *Public Speaking: An Audience-Centered Approach* (2008), which we recommend to anyone who wants to study the subject further. As the title suggests, this approach emphasizes consideration of the audience at every step of preparation and in the presentation itself. The reason for this approach is perhaps better understood intuitively by salesman and politicians than by academics, because it is based on the idea that we speak to audiences *in order to persuade them to do something*. While academics are not out to get sales or votes, encouraging other scholars to critically engage with our work (particularly early in our careers) is every bit as much a task of persuasion. Conferences will not be much help to us if we simply “share” our work by letting our ideas and findings wash over an audience that may or may not be listening. As we show in the following sections, the point of conferences is to induce feedback and inspire further reading of our work, which means that we must consciously present our ideas and findings in a way that maximizes audience receptiveness. As much as businesspeople, lawyers, and politicians, political scientists must observe William James’ rule that “what holds attention determines action” (see Cripe 1984).

DIFFERENT TYPES OF CONFERENCES, DIFFERENT ROLES

Different kinds of conferences serve different purposes in the profession and provide very different experiences for participants. Broadly speaking, political science has two main types of conferences: large hotel-based conferences such as the American Political Science Association (APSA) and Midwest Political Science Association (MPSA) annual meetings, which include panels in every subfield and discussions on a huge array of questions; and smaller conferences or workshops, which are often hosted by a university and organized around a single theme.¹

At small conferences, participants are immersed in a narrow but deep research agenda. Many attendees are likely individuals who have contributed to the scholarship being discussed. Much

work is done at these conferences, with both presenters and audiences using panels to develop and sharpen their own research. At these small conferences, presenters can expect that most of the audience will be familiar with the literature they are discussing and interested in the particular research they are presenting.

Scholars can expect to encounter a very different situation at large conferences. There are many reasons to go to the large, discipline-wide conferences. These events provide opportunities to present research, as well as useful deadlines to complete papers. They allow political scientists in all subfields to learn the latest developments in their areas of interest. Attendees use these conferences as an opportunity to network, talk to scholars with similar interests from different parts of the country and the world, and catch up with colleagues whom they rarely see. For presenters at these conferences, the most important thing to remember is that the audience is *browsing* research. While some attendees will be very familiar with the literature a paper is addressing, many or most will not. They probably have a passing interest in the topic, but it is probably not the main reason they came to the conference.

The point of conferences is to induce feedback and inspire further reading of our work, which means that we must consciously present our ideas and findings in a way that maximizes audience receptiveness. As much as businesspeople, lawyers, and politicians, political scientists must observe William James' rule that "what holds attention determines action."

This article primarily focuses on large, discipline-wide conferences. An important starting point for preparing for these conferences is being aware of the limitations of the audience. Given that many audience members will have little knowledge of any given subject and that not all of them will find the topic inherently interesting, what can presenters expect to achieve during a presentation and what can they do to get the most out of it?

PRESENTER GOALS AT LARGE PROFESSIONAL CONFERENCES

We believe that presenters at large conferences should have two important and realistic goals. The first is to convince at least some audience members to read more of their work. The second is to cajole the audience into providing useful feedback that will help improve the presenter's paper after the conference. To achieve either of these goals, presentations must both inform and excite the audience.

Presenters should think of their conference presentation as a kind of prospectus or advertisement for the underlying paper. They should not try to present the entire paper in all its richness, complexity, and subtlety, as that task is impossible to fulfill in 15 minutes (although that impossibility has not stopped plenty of people from trying). Instead, presenters should show the structured highlights of the paper in a way that encourages audience members to engage with the full paper later. At most large conferences, it is now normal for participants to upload their papers to the conference website beforehand; these papers are maintained there in the future and can make their way onto search engines such as Google Scholar, allowing suitably motivated audience members to find them easily at a later time. The audience may also seek out other research a presenter has done, especially if it is connected to

the research being presented. This ease of access to the full paper should make presenters more willing to present highlights orally, rather than trying to cram everything into a single presentation.

Most conference papers are reasonably well-developed drafts of work that presenters want to eventually publish. Getting useful feedback to improve the paper is therefore one of the most important aims of presenting at a conference. Even the most disengaged audience can provide some very general feedback about the merits of a paper ("This is great!" or "This is a dead end"), but presenters should try to provoke much more specific advice and criticism that can actually make the research better.

There are two potential sources of good feedback. The first source is people who are highly engaged with the relevant literature, can give detailed advice about where the paper being presented stands in relation to existing scholarship, and can identify what is promising or dubious about the work. The second source is people who are looking in from the outside—those who may not know much about the specific topic but can offer insight into the work's broader implications, developments in other areas that

may be useful to consider, and ways to make the work interesting or accessible to a broader audience.

Of course, presenters cannot choose their audiences. There is no way to guarantee that any particular audience will give insightful feedback or become inspired to read a particular paper. However, the advice we offer in the following section is aimed at maximizing the chances of both of these outcomes, which we believe are the main benefits of presenting at a large professional conference.

SPECIFIC ADVICE: WAYS TO ACHIEVE YOUR GOALS DURING PRESENTATIONS

Content Selection and Organization

The overriding principle of preparing a conference presentation should be making it as simple as possible. This advice may seem to go against our academic instincts; our work is generally very complicated, and even a highly parsimonious theory usually requires complex explanation. However, in a conference presentation, an audience has to be able to follow along in real time, and so we recommend presenting theories and empirics as skeletons only. As we will see, explaining even these skeletons in 15 minutes presents a serious challenge.

To explain the importance of simplicity a bit further, readers should recall what is necessary to read a scholarly paper properly. When complicated theories or empirical procedures are involved (as they usually are), grasping the entirety of a paper takes intense concentration and sometimes several hours. Most importantly, comprehending a paper usually requires multiple readings—if not of the whole paper, then of individual sentences and paragraphs. This need to revisit concepts and claims is one of the main disadvantages of being an audience member as opposed to a reader: if

audience members have not properly understood an idea, they usually cannot go back and listen to it again before moving on to the next part of the presentation. Simplified arguments and tests reduce the likelihood of the audience getting lost, which is why we recommend them.

Not only will a conference presentation leave out many parts of the paper, it may also have a very different structure. The most important question to answer in a presentation is: “How does this research take the literature somewhere new, interesting, and important?” This question will involve many different strands of the paper, and the paper itself will often answer it in a very diffuse way. A presentation, however, must address this issue concisely, in plain English, and from the outset: Why does this paper matter?

The answer to this question is very context-sensitive. If the title of the panel is “Game Theoretic Models of Bicameralism,” then presenters do not need to explain why bicameralism is an important research topic, or why game theory is an appropriate method for investigating it. More than a few presenters waste valuable time explaining things that everyone in the audience already understands or accepts. On the other hand, a number of presenters also dive straight into arcane debates without explaining why or how they are more broadly relevant. Presenters should ask themselves what about their paper is likely to be new to the audience and then craft explanations of the paper’s relevance in terms that the audience is likely to understand.

Only a few papers truly make three or more contributions to the literature, so we advise presenters to limit their claimed contributions to one point—or, on rare occasions, two. This simplification also helps the audience to recall the thrust of the paper and guards against rushed, once-over-lightly presentations that do many things poorly rather than a few things well. Given the aims of presentations that we have emphasized—encouraging the audience to read the presenter’s work and give good feedback—the audience should have a very clear idea of the one or sometimes two “take-home points” by the end of the talk. The conclusion should reiterate these points concisely, but it should not do much more than that. Simplicity is emphasis. And if there are new ideas in a conclusion, then it isn’t really a conclusion.

Timing

At large professional conferences, presentations are usually allotted about 15 minutes. Out of respect to other presenters and the audience, it is vital that presenters observe professional etiquette by sticking to this time limit. Time is a scarce resource at conferences and is supposed to be shared equally. Presenters who seriously breach time limits make themselves no friends, no matter how important they believe their material to be. The time available for each panel is strictly limited, and therefore, any additional time a presenter takes comes out of either the time available for another person’s presentation or the time available for the audience to engage with the presenters. Fifteen minutes is not a lot of time, and it seems even shorter when presenting, so it is important to prepare with the time limit in mind.

This situation is very different from a job talk, in which a presenter provides a thorough explanation of a single research paper. Job talks are usually twice or even three times as long as conference presentations, which offers some idea of the challenge of compressing a presentation of a paper into 15 minutes.

When preparing for a conference presentation, presenters should start by asking themselves: “What is the single most impor-

tant point I can convey to my audience in my 15 minutes?” As mentioned previously, on rare occasions a seasoned scholar might seek to advance two points, but we stress that this strategy is often not justified and is risky when pursued. Making one point well is much better than making two points poorly.

Presenters should select one element of their paper that they believe will generate the best audience reaction, discussion, and feedback. The audience response, recall, is the presenter’s overarching goal. In the majority of papers, the novel element is either the substantive theory or the substantive empirical results; one or the other should be the focus of the presentation. In some papers, the novel element is a new way of measuring a key variable, a new structure for the analysis, or a new methodological technique, but in our experience, these papers are a minority. In any event, once a presenter has decided what the single biggest contribution of the paper is, he or she should plan everything else in the presentation around making that point as persuasively as possible. In practice, fulfilling this aim means that at least half the allotted time will be spent talking directly about the major point of the presentation. If a paper’s focus is empirical, for example, the presenter should start to talk about the empirics after only about five minutes of preamble spent discussing the literature and sketching out a theory. This is a tight timeframe.

All other elements of the paper should be addressed fairly briefly in the presentation, and only to the extent that they assist the audience to understand the main point. The literature review—almost never the most noteworthy part of a presentation—should consist of very brief remarks on one or two relevant aspects of the literature. Presenters should avoid giving an extensive intellectual history of their subject. For audience members who are already familiar with the area, such reviews are pointless, and those who are unfamiliar with the literature will not benefit much from a potted history either, as they only need to know the current substantive controversies that the presentation is addressing. (One obvious exception to this advice is any paper that primarily focuses on the history of political thought.)

Aside from specialist methods panels, presenters should also limit their methodological discussions to answering the question of why their method is appropriate for the work they are doing, rather than trying to explain how this method works. Again, an audience that is familiar with the method does not need to have the basics repeated, while those who are not familiar with it can hardly learn it in three minutes.

Unless the paper’s main contribution is the development of a new dataset, presenters should also not spend much time describing the data. Such description usually neither provokes feedback nor inspires audiences. If the audience wants to know more about the data, they can read the paper on the conference or scholar’s website.

If possible, the presenter should practice beforehand to get the timing right. This step is most important for first-time presenters, and it is completely normal for graduate students to practice presenting, often in groups. If you are timing another person’s practice talk, use the same discipline that the strictest chair of a panel would use. Anything else can lead to unpleasant surprises.

We realize, however, that most presenters do not practice. These individuals can, however, still prepare with timing in mind. In this case, you should decide in advance which material will be removed from the talk if it starts to run too long. Many, many scholars have been in a position in which the chair says they have

only a couple of minutes remaining, but the presenters have at least eight minutes of material left. In that situation, it is much better to omit some less important material than to try and talk quickly through all the remaining material, which might cause the main points to be neglected or glossed over. Talking faster does not make the argument more persuasive. It is quite common at conferences to see presenters skip slides when they are running out of time. It is preferable to know in advance which slides those will be, rather than deciding after a few agonized seconds of staring at them.

Finally, we have some advice for chairs of panels: give presenters a time signal *every five minutes* until they have five minutes left, every two minutes after that, and when time expires. In a typical panel with four papers allotted 15 minutes each, the chair would signal at five, 10, 12, 14, and 15 minutes. This strategy should help presenters avoid falling hopelessly behind and will help the session run smoothly and on time. Currently, it seems to be standard practice to give one signal when five minutes remain and another signal when one minute is left, but in our experience, this approach does not give enough guidance to presenters, especially during the initial 10-minute block. Providing more frequent signals allows for better adjustment during the presentation and should help to avoid presenters' all-too-familiar looks of panic or pleas for 30 more seconds. Ideally, a clock should be visible to the presenter during every presentation, but since presenters often are not paying a lot of attention to when they start, this is no substitute for a diligent chair.

Presentation

At some European conferences and in some other disciplines, it is normal for presenters to read their papers. They sit at a table with a complete or abbreviated paper in front of them and, with their eyes fixed firmly on the pages, read out loud for 15 or 20 minutes. It is possible to present a conference paper well using this broad technique if the written presentation is specially prepared with the audience's welfare uppermost in the author's mind, if the reading is practiced once or twice for critical colleagues beforehand, and—crucially—if the paper is “performed” rather than “read” on the day. Nonetheless, thinking about what is usually wrong with this practice is a good starting point for thinking about how to do an oral presentation properly. Few people would enjoy being an audience member in a panel for which everyone simply read out their original written papers, much less learn from it. All the advice in this section, therefore, is aimed at making presentations less like audiobook versions of papers and more like talks for which the main priority is engaging the minds of the audience.

The first thing to note is that written English is very different from spoken English. This distinction is widely accepted but has less influence than we would like on the way that people turn their papers into presentations. Presentations need to be couched in natural-sounding English for the audience to feel that the presenter knows they are there and cares about whether they are getting anything out of it. Unfortunately, any long-form notes, even those prepared specifically for a presentation, are likely to be in “written English.” As a result, any reading from written notes is likely to sound disengaged and inappropriate to the setting. In place of speech notes, we recommend that presenters use a series of very brief written prompts that are not intended to be read aloud, but that let them know where they are in the presentation and what comes next. This method should pose no difficulty for

most presenters, who already know each aspect of their paper backwards. The only reason for the prompts are to make sure the presentation is properly structured.

This suggestion brings us to the point that having a clear plan for the talk is critical. Let the audience know what is coming and what the main points of interest are going to be. A conference presentation is not *The Sixth Sense*, and the audience is not going to appreciate late twists and surprises. Instead, clearly frame the paper for the audience—a structure makes your listeners more likely to understand your points and follow along. One effective framing device is to place the most important points first in each section of the presentation to ensure that everything serves the purpose of explaining them. Another benefit to articulating the most important concepts first is that if time becomes a problem, then the take-home messages will not end up being glossed over or abandoned.

Finally, we suggest that presentations tell a story about the real world of politics. Every political science paper, no matter how technical or theoretical, is fundamentally about politics and has narrative potential. The audience needs to see this story, not just for entertainment value, but because a narrative shows them the substantive importance of the work beyond the confines of a scholarly debate. To this end, literature and theory should be explained in substantive political terms, rather than using proper names as ciphers for theoretical positions, and empirical analysis should focus on concepts rather than variable names.

AFTER THE TALK: QUESTION AND ANSWER PERIODS

Academic questioning can serve multiple purposes: to assist the presenters to improve their research, to assess the presenter, or to promote the person asking the question. While only a few sadistic questioners attempt to actively belittle a presenter's research during the Q&A session, significant numbers of questions are unhelpful nonetheless. Some questions are designed to make the questioner sound knowledgeable, promote the questioner's own paper in the next day's panel, or just make a senior scholar in the room aware of the questioner's name. This situation can be understandably frustrating for presenters. Our advice, however, is that presenters should treat every question as though it is a helpful one. Presenters can usually gain some form of insight from a question asked at a professional conference, even if the question is phrased in an aggressive or self-aggrandizing manner. In the long term, it is far better to make generous assumptions about peers than cynical ones. Consistently erring on the side of generosity has two practical consequences:

1. Presenters should always treat a question (however aggressively it is posed) as “friendly fire” and respond in a friendly manner. Thank the person for the question and let him or her know how it helps the presenter and audience understand the topic better. If necessary, creatively interpret the question so that it is relevant to the paper rather than only to the questioner's ego. If the questioner is actually trying to help, this approach is mere politeness. But if he or she is trying to belittle the presenter or promote him or herself, then nothing undermines that strategy more than a presenter who takes this ulterior motive in stride and looks past the style to address the substance.
2. Provide a direct response to the question somewhere in the answer. Surprisingly large cohorts of political scientists appear

to treat questions as an invitation to talk in general terms about any issue related vaguely to the question. They are not. Almost all questions are specific inquiries that require specific answers. If a questioner asks, "What happens when you account for X?" then the answer is either "I don't know at this point," "The main findings change," or "The main findings do not change." In most cases, a presenter will want to explain him or herself further, but any answer that does not provide that direct answer somewhere sells the question short and indicates a lack of transparency or honesty on the part of the presenter.

Questions can be both friendly and difficult at the same time, and many very challenging questions are thrown at presenters at conferences. One source of angst for graduate students and junior faculty in particular is how to handle a situation in which they are asked a very hard question for which they either do not know the answer or know an answer that undermines their findings. In these cases, we recommend:

1. Give a truthful answer. If a presenter is staring at a room of 20 people with MAs and Ph.D.s in the same field and chooses to lie about the area of that field in which they are all interested, it is highly probable that he or she will be caught. Giving deceptive answers also runs counter to the entire enterprise of political science, which is to advance our truthful knowledge about the political world.
2. Do not be afraid to say: "I don't know." Conferences are all about presenting works in progress, which almost always have areas of weakness or imperfect knowledge.
3. Take something constructive out of the question. If the presenter does not know the answer, it pays to address how one might go about finding the answer. If the answer to the question undermines the paper's findings, then it might pay to discuss how to best resolve the contradiction. These are positive, constructive, helpful responses to challenging questions.

CONCLUSION: WHY READ RECYCLED DALE CARNEGIE?

A good portion of the advice we offer in this article is uncontroversial, and some may believe the article patronizing as a result. We are all professionals in this presentation-heavy occupation, with many years of training. We all know what a time limit is and why we should stick to it. We all know that we should be nice to our colleagues when they ask us questions. And we all know that the point of conference presentations is to help people, often our colleagues, learn about new knowledge.

Why, then, have we felt the need to make those points again? Sadly, the answer is that many presentations at our highest profile meetings fail to meet even these basic standards. Presenters routinely run over time, sometimes significantly so, and when chairs try to constrain their fame to 15 minutes, they make their presentation less audience-friendly instead of less wordy. Presenters also routinely confuse both themselves and their audience while trying in vain to describe a rich new theory and an associated battery of tests in all their complicated glory inside 15 minutes. By allowing these norms to persist, we collectively make our meetings less valuable for everybody.

Making presentations better, whether in a panel or a roundtable, is not very hard. Presenters should make their presentations simpler and cleaner and should not be afraid to tell stories that link their political science with actual politics. Chairs need to enforce the time limits and provide presenters with more time signals. The effort required to meet all these goals is small, but the potential gains for our meetings' usefulness to both presenters and session attendees are large. ■

NOTES

We would like to thank Skip Lupia, the PS editorial staff, and anonymous reviewers for very helpful suggestions and comments.

1. Some examples of these smaller conferences, drawn from APSA's website, are: "Re-engaging the World: the Obama Administration and the Institutions of Global Governance," St John's University, February 11, 2011; "The U.K. and the U.S. in 2010: Transition and Transformation," George Washington University, September 1, 2011; "Interpreting Authoritarianism: Politics, Practices, Meanings," Exeter University, UK, September 20–21, 2010; and "Dangerous Crossings: Politics at the Limits of the Human," Johns Hopkins University, October 1–2, 2010.

REFERENCES

- Beebe, Steven A., and Susan Beebe. 2008. *Public Speaking: An Audience-Centered Approach*. 7th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Billig, Michael. 1989. *Arguing and Thinking: A Rhetorical Approach to Social Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cripe, Nicholas M. 1984. "Fundamentals of Persuasive Oral Argument." *The Forum* 20: 342–58.
- Hovland, Carl I., Irving L. Janis, and Harold H. Kelley. 1953. *Communication and Persuasion: Psychological Studies of Opinion Change*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Quinn, Robert E., Herbert W. Hildebrandt, Priscilla S. Rogers, and Michael P. Thompson. 1991. "A Competing Values Framework for Analyzing Presentational Communication in Management Contexts." *Journal of Business Communication* 3 (28): 213–32.
- Rowley-Jolivet, Elizabeth, and Shirley Carter-Thomas. 2005. "The Rhetoric of Conference Presentation Introductions: Context, Argument and Interaction." *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 15 (1): 45–70.