Thoughts on Talks

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A CAVEAT. These are *my* thoughts based on my experiences as an audience member and job candidate after learning from political scientists, other academics, and professionals. Your approach can and should be different. But hopefully you find a nugget of wisdom.

Three Goals

I have three goals when giving any talk, including a job talk. I want the audience to:

1. Remember the key point.
2. Believe the main point, based on a sketch of the arguments.
3. Leave excited about the project.

Avoid This!

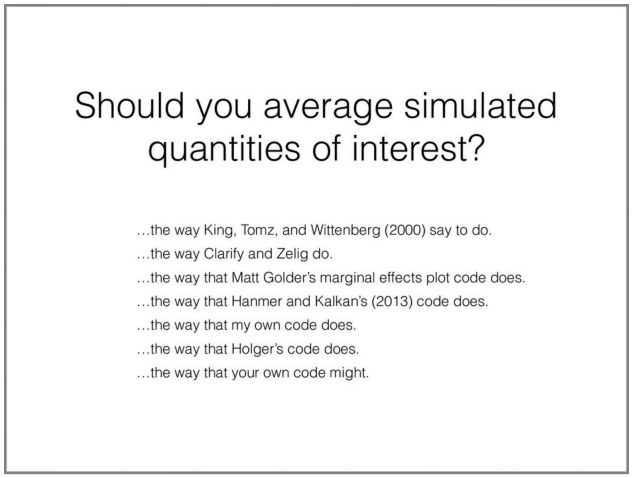
Do not describe the entire paper. Regurgitate-the-whole-paper works out rather poorly. A manuscript offers an ideal medium for detailed, thorough arguments. A talk does not allow for detailed, thorough arguments. Instead, *a talk offers a medium to engage your audience.*

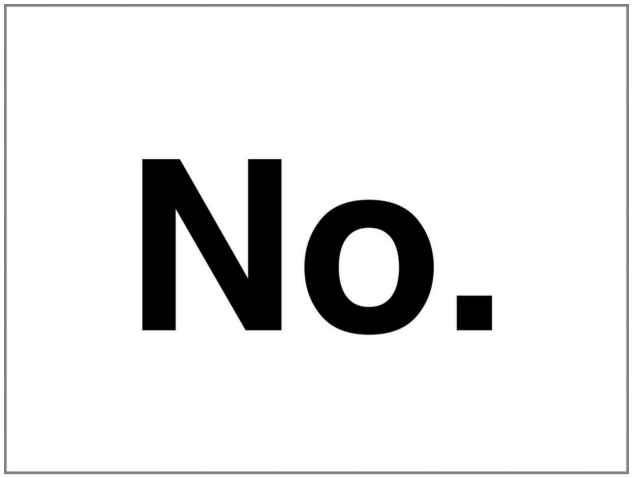
Designing a Talk

I follow five steps to design my talks.

Step 1: Choose the Key Point

First, I carefully choose the key point I want my audience to remember. It probably corresponds to the key point of the paper. I open the talk by ~~by turning around and reading the title~~ clearly stating this point.





Usually, I say "Today, I'm going to convince you that…"

Here are some example openings from recent talks:

- "Previous literature claims that proportional representation creates an incentive for parties to mobilize everywhere. Today, I'm going to convince you that proportional rules actual give parties *no* incentive to mobilize *any*where."
- "Today I'm going to convince you that the Gauss-Markov theorem is an elegant result, but it's not useful for applied researchers."
- "Today, I'm going to convince you that when you're dealing with separation in logistic regression models, the prior matters a lot, so you better choose a good one."

I refer back to this key point often throughout the talk.

The prior matters a lot,
so choose a good one.

Key Point

Gauss-Markov theorem is an elegant result,
but it's not useful for applied researchers.

Step 2: Support the Key Point

Second, I think *hard* about how to support the key point. The talk medium severely limits the amount of content I can include, so I "sketch" the argument. For me, two points works well for a 10-minute talk at a conference. Three (maybe four) works well for a 40-minute job talk. I preview these throughly, so that everyone understands how the supporting points relate to the key point.

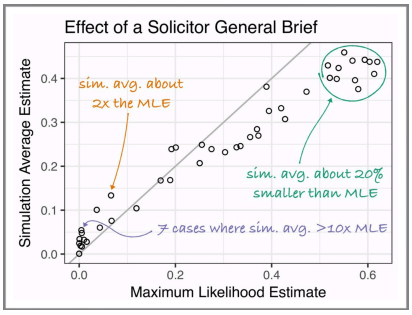
- I *sketch* arguments that appear in great detail in the manuscript.
- I *skip* arguments that appear in the manuscript, especially mathematical arguments.
- I include figures, examples, case studies, and stories that do not appear in the manuscript.

Step 3: Decide on the Details

For each supporting point, I decide what details to discuss, mention, and skip. I usually discuss a detail fully or not at all. If you include a figure, explain it fully. If you include an equation, explain it fully. If you have a game theoretical argument in the manuscript, but you only summarize the intuition in the talk, you might mention the details appear in the paper.

For example, I recently gave a 10-minute talk about a paper with a formal model. I *discussed* a stylized example, *mentioned* that a full model appeared in the paper, *skipped* the utility functions and equilibria, *discussed* one scatterplot in detail, and *skipped* the details of the statistical modeling.

I write out the actual words I want to say in a document.



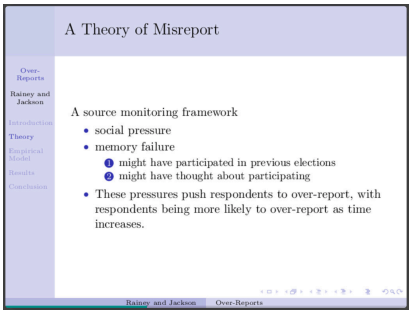
Step 4: Design Excellent Slides

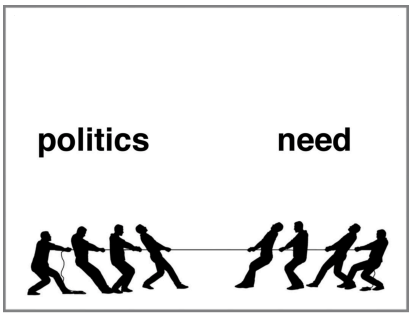
Make your slides look awesome.

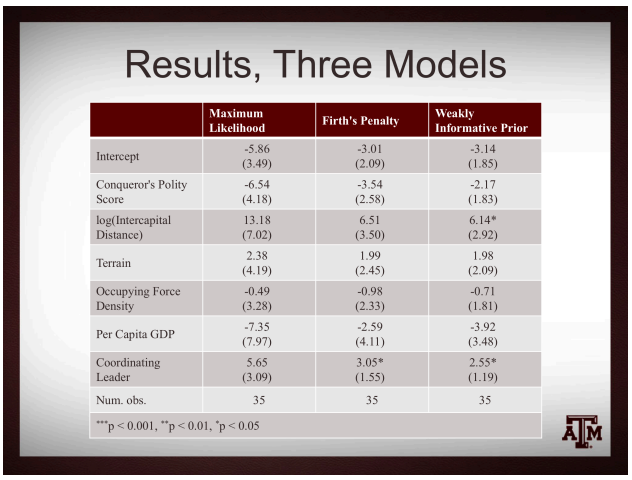
You probably need to make new versions of your figures and tables. Use bigger, bolder lines, points, and words. Use sans-serif fonts. Use color well. Adopt a style.

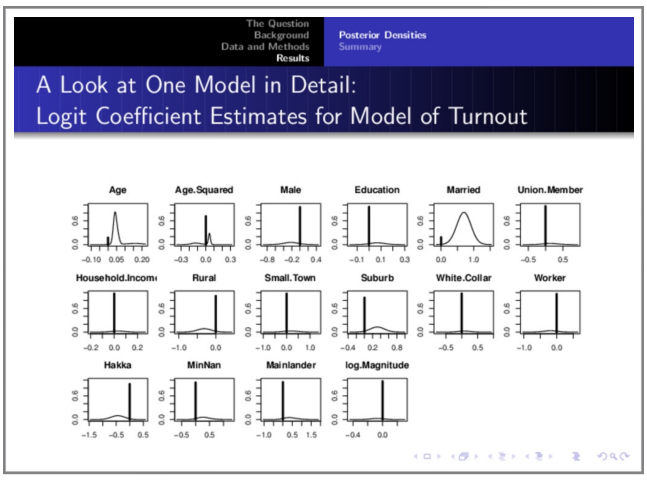
I find WYSIWYG software like Keynote or PowerPoint indispensable for designing slides. LaTeX is great for manuscripts and terrible for slides, so don't use Beamer.

Compare the slides below. Compare my first conference presentation using Beamer to my a later job talk.



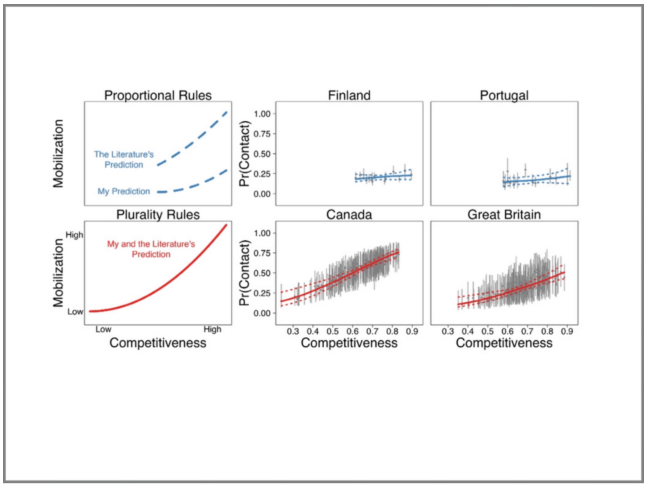






	Maximum Likelihood	Firth's Penalty	Weakly Inf. Prior
Intercept	-5.9 3.5	-3 2.1	-3.1 1.9
Conqueror's Polity Score	-6.5 4.2	-3.5 2.6	-2.2 1.8
Log(Intercapital Distance)	13.2 7.0	6.5 3.5	**6.1** 2.9
Terrain	2.4 4.2	2 2.5	2 2.1
Occupying Force Density	-0.5 3.3	-1 2.3	-0.7 1.8
Per Capita GDP	-7.4 8.0	-2.6 4.1	-3.9 3.5
Coordinating Leader	5.7 3.1	**3.1** 1.6	**2.6** 1.2
Num. of Obs.	35	35	35

Bold indicates $p < 0.05$.



Step 5: Practice

Practice your talk. Practice it alone. Practice in front of a small group. Practice it in front of a large group if you can find one.

Some people think it's cool to roll into a talk unprepared (e.g., me second-year graduate student).

Practice conference talks out of respect for the audience.

Practice your job talk because it's the most important talk you'll ever give. The job talk receives hugely disproportionate weight (conditional on getting an interview).

For high-stakes talks, such as job talks, I recommend the following:

- Practice the entire talk 25 times from start to finish. I start with a document with the exact words I hope to say. After about 10 practices, I can start to replace the sentences with bullet points and then the bullet points with one-word cues. When I'm giving the talk, I have the cues if I need them, but I rarely do.
- Practice the first two minutes and last two minutes of your talk 50 times. I write these out verbatim and review them often. I don't need to read them in the talk, because I know them thoroughly. I practice them so thoroughly that they don't seem rehearsed. But I know exactly what I want to say.

When stakes are lower, it's okay to practice less. But a few intentional practices go a long way.

Parting Thoughts

Seek the advice of others. Read what other political scientists have written job talks (e.g., #1, #2, #3, #4). Read books written by professional communicators (e.g., #1, #2, #3, #4). Watch good talks and learn from them (e.g, #1, #2, #3, #4).

But there's no recipe for a great talk. I use little text; others use a lot. I like to interact with the audience; others prefer to hold questions until the end. I have a light-hearted approach; others adopt a more serious style. You do you.

Regardless of style, we both want to communicate a key point to a general audience of political scientists. Focus on that goal. Mind the medium. Prepare thoroughly. Give a great talk.