



Weird Science: Can newspaper op-eds change your mind?

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Could opinion pieces like those published in this newspaper change your long-term view on certain issues?

A new study out of the US' Yale University suggests yes it could - and that's irregardless of your political leanings or initial stance on the topic.

"People read an argument and were persuaded by it," said the study's lead author and Yale political scientist Assistant Professor Alexander Coppock.

"It's that simple."

The researchers enrolled 3567 people into the study through an online tool.

In an initial survey, participants shared background information, such as their gender and party affiliation, before being randomly assigned into a control group or one of five "treatment" groups.

Participants in the treatment groups were shown one of five op-eds that had been published in a major news outlet by a writer affiliated with the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, or US Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky.

Participants in the control group were not given an op-ed to read.

The op-eds, which had appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, or *Newsweek*, advocated libertarian policy positions on issues such as climate change, federal spending on transportation and infrastructure, and instituting a federal flat tax on income.

The researchers gauged participants' immediate reactions to the op-ed pieces and surveyed them again 10 and 30 days later, comparing their responses to those of participants in the control group.

The researchers performed the same experiment on a group of 2169 "elites" including journalists, law professors, policy-focused academics, think tank scholars, bankers, and congressional staffers.

In both experiments, people exposed to op-eds shifted their views to support the argument presented in the piece, with the general public being marginally more persuaded than the elites.

While 50 per cent of people in the control group agreed with the views expressed in a given op-ed, 65 per cent to 70 per cent of the people in the treatment groups expressed agreement with the op-eds' authors immediately after reading the pieces, Coppock said.

"These large differences suggest that people are persuadable on policy issues by substantial amounts."

The gap between the control and treatment groups closed by about half after 10 days, but remained substantial.

Participants' views changed little between 10 and 30 days after reading the op-eds, demonstrating a lasting effect, he said.

The researchers concluded that op-eds are a cost effective way to influence people's views.