

# Artful dodgers: Responding but not answering often undetected

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How can some people respond to a question without answering the question, yet satisfy their listeners? This skill of "artful dodging" and how to better detect it are explored in an article published by the American Psychological Association.

People typically judge a speaker with the goal of forming an opinion of the speaker, which can make them susceptible to dodges, according to the study published online in the [Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied](#). Limited attention capacity is another reason people fall for dodges, said the authors, citing a previous study in which people counting basketball passes failed to notice a man in a gorilla suit walking through the game.

Dodge detection greatly increased when [listeners](#) were directed to pay close attention to the relevance of speakers' answers with regard to the questions, or if the text of the correct question was visible to the listeners as the speaker responded. The ability to recognize a dodge more than doubled, from 39 percent without the text to 88 percent with the text.

"Given concerns that voters are uninformed or misinformed and the many calls for increased [education](#) of voters—from politicians and pundits alike—these results suggest that very simple interventions can dramatically help voters focus on the substance of politicians' answers rather than their personal style," said authors Todd Rogers, PhD, and Michael I. Norton, PhD, both of Harvard University.

The researchers conducted four different experiments with four separate groups of people totaling 1,139 men and women averaging 44 years old. In three of the studies, participants watched a video of a mock political debate and then responded to an online survey. In the fourth study, participants listened to excerpts of a recording of a mock political debate and then responded to questions.

The study results indicated that people are frequently unable to remember an initial question if a speaker answers a similar question. Moreover, listeners rated [speakers](#) who answered a similar question just as positively as those who answered the correct question. Listeners had the most negative reactions if speakers answered blatantly different questions or if they fumbled their words even while answering the correct question.

But dodges aren't always bad, the authors noted, "such as when someone asks coworkers for their opinion on a new outfit." They pointed out that while posting the text of questions can be done for televised debates, it's not practical to carry around a poster of your questions when going about everyday life. And dodge detecting can be detrimental if people are engaging in creative, wide-ranging conversations.

"Still, our results suggest that in many cases, dodges cause sought-after and relevant information to go unspoken, with little awareness and few consequences," the authors said.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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