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Recommended Citation

Grier, Lily, "Why Do People Use Unreasonable Arguments? The Case of the Ad Hominem" (2018). *Spring 2018*. 50.

https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wushta_spr2018/50

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WHY DO PEOPLE USE UNREASONABLE ARGUMENTS? THE CASE OF THE AD HOMINEM

Lily Grier

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This article examines discrepancies between reasoned logic and everyday argumentation. Specifically, it investigates the perceived and actual efficacy of the ad hominem argument, wherein an individual's character is attacked rather than the arguments that individual makes. Despite research suggesting that even children without any background in formal argumentation are able to recognize the ad hominem argument as unreasonable, people continue to fling ad hominem attacks about in politics, courtrooms, and everyday argumentation. The studies at hand employ a belief-change format to investigate the conditions under which people expect ad hominem arguments to effect change in others' beliefs as well as the conditions under which ad hominem arguments effect change in people's own beliefs. Study 1 looked at subjects' ratings of a hypothetical audience's degree of agreement with speakers on Brexit or net neutrality before and after exposure to ad hominem attacks against the speakers. Findings suggest that people expect ad hominem arguments to effect significant change in others' attitudes. Study 2 looked at subjects' own ratings of agreement with speakers on Brexit and net neutrality before and after exposure to ad hominem arguments. Findings suggest that ad hominem arguments can change people's attitudes, but with limited efficacy. Results from Study 3, which looked at changes in first-person agreement with speakers on Brexit and abortion, suggest that ad hominem arguments effect change in people's attitudes on Brexit, but not on abortion. Findings from Study 4, which looked at perceived changes in a hypothetical audience's attitudes on Brexit and abortion, suggest people expect ad hominem arguments to change others' attitudes across discussion topics. This article therefore argues that while people expect the ad hominem argument to change people's attitudes more than it does, the ad hominem argument can effect small but significant change in people's attitudes about issues less provocative than abortion.