

# When Pandering is Not Persuasive

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## **Abstract**

Technological advances have made it increasingly easy for candidates and campaigns to target particular messages to specific groups of voters; however, there has been little attention paid to whether targeted pandering to groups actually works. In this paper, we use a survey experiment to examine whether and the extent to which targeted appeals to narrow groups provide candidates with an advantage over the use of broader appeals. The experimental design allows us to fully randomize both the group to which the candidate makes an appeal (the middle class, religious conservatives, Latinos, or unions) and the source of the appeal (a Democratic or Republican candidate). We generally find that targeted appeals do little to increase support for candidates among the narrower groups, while citizens who do not belong to the targeted group tend to penalize the candidate for making such an appeal. The one consistent exception is for appeals to religious conservatives—Republican candidates fared significantly better among born again Christians when targeting their appeal to religious conservatives rather than the middle class. Ultimately, we conclude that targeted pandering may not be as effective as is often assumed, but that among certain groups and in certain contexts, such pandering can pay off.

# Introduction

Technological advances have made it increasingly easy for candidates and campaigns to target particular messages to specific groups of voters. Candidates can use richly enhanced voter files to send unique mailers or phone calls to certain types of individuals, they can use Google Adwords to target online ads for individuals conducting certain types of searches online, and they can use Facebook and other social networking sites to ensure that only certain types of individuals see certain types of messages. Though not all candidates for office make full use of such targeted communication (Hersh and Schaffner (2011)), these techniques are increasingly used by candidates for a variety of offices.

While a growing body of research examines the extent to which candidates target their messages to particular subgroups (e.g. Hillygus and Shields (2008); Hersh and Schaffner (2011)) as well as the effects of campaigns in general (Brady, Johnston, and Sides (2006); Iyengar and Simon (2000)), there has been less attention paid to whether targeted pandering to groups actually works. The effects of targeted messages are particularly difficult to understand from observational studies, since targeting allows candidates to select a message that they expect members of the targeted group will be most receptive to. In other words, the groups targeted and the messages used to influence those groups are selected precisely with the dependent variable (influence) in mind, making it difficult to deal with the inherent endogeneity in an observational design (Arceneaux (Forthcoming)).

In this paper, we use a survey experiment to gain a better understanding of whether and the extent to which targeted appeals to narrow groups provide candidates with an advantage over the use of broader appeals. The experimental design allows us to fully randomize both the group to which the candidate makes an appeal (the middle class, religious conservatives, Latinos, or unions) and the source of the appeal (a Democratic or Republican candidate). In general, we find that targeted appeals do little to increase support for the candidate among

the narrower groups (relative to an appeal to the middle class), while citizens who do not belong to the targeted group tend to penalize the candidate for making such an appeal. The one consistent exception is for appeals to religious conservatives—Republican candidates fared significantly better among born again Christians when targeting their appeal to religious conservatives rather than the middle class, while Democratic candidates fared worse when pursuing the same strategy. Ultimately, we conclude that targeted pandering may not be as effective as is often assumed, but that among certain groups and in certain contexts, such pandering can produce significant returns.

## **Targeted Messages in Political Campaigns**

During the past two decades, candidates have become increasingly adept at identifying voter types and sending tailored messages to those voters. Hillygus and Shields (2008) describe the evolution of candidate strategies from an emphasis on broader appeals delivered via mass media during the mid- to late- 20th century to more fine-tuned appeals transmitted to specific subgroups over targeted media. The authors refer to this as “dog-whistle politics”—the ability to craft a message so that only the intended audience can hear it (2009, p. 6).

Candidates are now better able to target their messages for narrower audiences because the information necessary to find those audiences is easier to gather than it once was. As Ansolabehere and Hersh (2011) document, the Help America Vote Act has led states to digitize their voter files, making them much easier for political organizations to acquire and work with. For example, the Democratic Party’s Voter Activation Network provides candidates with the ability to locate voters with different partisan attachments, of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and of different ages. Supplemental lists from labor unions can also help candidates to locate union members (Hersh and Schaffner (2011)). Firms like Catalist provide even more detailed information on voters by merging consumer and survey

data (Hersh (2010)).

Thus, candidates now have the ability to determine which of various relevant political groupings a particular voter belongs to. But how do candidates appeal to these voters once they have made that determination? The study of targeted campaign messages has typically been challenging since such messages are delivered with the precise intent of keeping them out of view from the general public. However, a handful of studies have provided some insight as to the content of these targeted appeals. For example, Hillygus and Shields (2008) analyze direct mail pieces logged by a random sample of American respondents and find that candidates were more likely to discuss social “wedge issues” in targeted media than they were in television advertisements. By confining such controversial messages to targeted communications sent to more receptive groups, candidates may have been able to increase support from that group while avoiding backlash from other citizens. Hillygus and Shields also note that targeted messages appeared to be designed to persuade voters to support a particular candidate rather than purely on mobilizing core supporters.

Nteta and Schaffner (2011) examine appeals made to African Americans and Hispanics via direct mail. They find that such appeals differ both substantively and superficially from appeals made to voters in general. For example, direct mail pieces designed for Hispanics are more likely to focus on social welfare issues, but they are also much more likely to feature a picture of Latinos.

The fact that candidates craft very different messages for targeted media than they do for mass media suggests that they believe these messages will have different effects. In a campaign message that will reach all voters, candidates may prefer to make broad appeals that will alienate the smallest share of the population as possible; as such, this message may have less of an effect on any given voter. When messages can be hidden from all but the intended recipients, candidates might craft those messages to be more pointed and, therefore, might expect them to be more influential on that smaller group of voters.

## The Effects of Targeted Messages

Political scientists have long examined whether and how campaign messages influence citizens; however, this research has focused almost exclusively on the effect of television advertising (Iyengar and Simon (2000)). Television advertisements have been shown to increase citizens' knowledge about the candidates, but the notion that they can persuade voters to support a particular candidate is a source of some debate. Observational studies have often failed to find a persuasive effect for television ads, while experimental and quasi-experimental work has found that ads can be persuasive (e.g. Brader (2005); Johnston and Jamieson (2004); and Huber and Arceneaux (2007)).

Since targeted appeals are often difficult for political scientists to observe (particularly compared to television advertising), analyzing the effects they have can also be challenging. A well-developed body of field-experimental research has shown that targeted appeals can increase turnout, though usually only by a modest amount (e.g. Green and Gerber (2008)). However, only a handful of studies have examined whether targeted appeals are successful in *persuading* voters to support a particular candidate (Hillygus and Shields (2008)). Most notably, Hillygus and Monson (n.d.) use the previously mentioned collection of direct mail pieces from the 2004 presidential campaign to find that targeted mail and phone calls had a “small but significant effect on vote choice” (p. 31). Arceneaux (2007) uses a field experiment in a down-ballot contest to uncover a much larger effect for canvassing on the likelihood of those targeted supporting the candidate.

While these studies provide preliminary evidence that targeted appeals can be effective, many questions remain about how and on whom those appeals work. First, are targeted messages more effective than general appeals that could be made without targeting the message to a particular group? Since candidates generally send more group-oriented messages via targeted media, it is not clear whether these narrower messages are more effective than broad-based appeals. It may be the case that group members do not always react more

positively to appeals to a narrower group identity. For example, Latinos tend to demonstrate much less of a sense of group identity than African Americans (Rodriguez (2000); Jones-Correa and Leal (1996)); thus, a targeted appeal to Latinos may be no more successful than a more general appeal to workers or the middle class.

Second, do appeals to particular groups work better when they come from a candidate affiliated with a particular party? Iyengar and Valentino (2000) show that “campaign advertising is most effective when the sponsoring candidates pitch their messages to the traditional strength of their parties” (p. 127). For example, issue appeals are more persuasive when they come from the party that has traditionally owned that issue. Candidates may have more success with appeals to groups who are typically part of their party’s coalition than they will when trying to make targeted appeals to groups who usually support the opposing party. For example, a Democrat making an appeal to work on behalf of unions may be more credible than a Republican making a similar claim since Democrats have traditionally provided more representation of that group’s interests. Likewise, a Republican candidate may have more success with a claim to represent the views of religious conservatives than a Democrat.

Finally, will individuals who are not members of the targeted group penalize a candidate for appealing to that group? The fact that candidates tend to send different types of messages in targeted media than they do in mass media suggests that they think that narrower (group-based) appeals would cost them support among non-group members. At a minimum, citizens may treat such an appeal as a cue providing them with insight into the types of policies that the politician might support once in office. However, individuals observing such an appeal may also conclude that the candidate would prioritize the concerns of the group to which he/she is appealing over those of other citizens.

Overall, there is much that is unknown about whether and how targeted appeals persuade citizens. After all, candidates and campaign organizations generally do not make their direct

mail or other targeted messages public. Even when scholars have been able to gain access to the content of targeted media produced by campaigns, they are generally unable to determine who received those messages (e.g. Nteta and Schaffner (2011)). Relying on citizens to report whether and how they were contacted by campaigns is also problematic since individuals tend to have unreliable memories of such contact (Bradburn et al. 1987; Pierce and Lovrich 1982; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1998). Furthermore, even if it was possible to reliably observe the targeted messages that individuals receive during campaigns, distinguishing the effects of those messages would still be difficult. In his book on political targeting, Hal Malchow notes that “the process of selecting voters for special message mailings is this: 1) decide what audience is most receptive to the message, and 2) use your targeting segments and good judgment to select the voters most likely to be your persuasion targets” (2008, p. 49; see also Wielhouwer (2003)). Campaigns strategically send messages to individuals who are likely to be most influenced by those messages. In other words, whether a candidate sends an appeal to a voter and the type of appeal delivered is not exogenous to the likelihood of that voter supporting the candidate. To the extent that we might find that individuals who received a particular message are more likely to support the candidate that sent the message, we could not easily determine whether that support resulted from the message itself (Arceneaux (Forthcoming)).

## **Experimental Design**

To overcome the limitations of an observational approach to understanding the effects of targeted messages, we employ a survey experimental design. We embedded an experiment on a module of the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The experiment was administered to 2,500 respondents during the pre-election wave of interviews (conducted throughout the month of October). The CCES was conducted by YouGov/Polimetrix of



Palo Alto, California, and consists of matched random sample surveys. YouGov/Polimetrix maintains a large panel of people who have been recruited to participate in online surveys. They began by taking a target random sample of the adult population based on the American Community Survey. For each member of this target sample, YouGov/Polimetrix finds members from their opt-in sample that match that person on a number of characteristics including gender, age, race, region, education, news interest, marital status, party identification, ideology, religious affiliation, church attendance, income, and registration status. The matched sample is then weighted using propensity scores to assure that the sample is nationally representative.<sup>1</sup>

Respondents were presented with a brief description of a congressional candidate named Williams who they were told was running for a seat in the House of Representatives in 2010. They were then asked how inclined they would be to support Williams if they lived in his district. Respondents could place themselves on a scale that ranged from “very unlikely to vote for him” on one extreme (coded 0) and “very likely to vote for him” on the other end of the scale (coded 100). Overall, there was significant variance in answers given to this question. The average rating across all conditions was a 35, but ratings ranged from 0 to 100 with a standard deviation of 33.<sup>2</sup>

The experiment was designed to randomize two pieces of information that respondents were given about Williams. First, approximately half of the respondents were told that Williams was a Republican while the other half were told that he was a Democrat. Second, respondents were told that “During the campaign, he vowed to ‘work hard on behalf of [GROUP]’ if he was elected to office.” Respondents were randomly assigned to hear that

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<sup>1</sup>Additional information about the sampling procedure is available at <http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cces/home>.

<sup>2</sup>Approximately one-third of the sample chose the “not sure” option rather than rate how likely they would be to support Williams. These responses were discarded from the analysis that follows. There was no significant difference in an individual’s probability of answering “not sure” across the eight experimental conditions.

Williams would work on behalf of one of four different groups—“the middle class,” “Latinos,” “Unions,” or “religious conservatives.”<sup>3</sup>

Any number of groups might have been chosen for experimental conditions, but we limited our experiment to these four groups to avoid creating too many conditions. This was particularly important given our interest in understanding how different types of citizens are affected by these appeals. The choice of these particular groups does deserve some explanation. We chose “the middle class” as one of our four groups largely to create a baseline against which to judge the effects of appealing to the other groups. The “middle class” is broadly defined in American politics; indeed, most Americans identify themselves as part of this group.<sup>4</sup> Thus, we expect that most respondents in this condition would view themselves as a target of this appeal or, at the very least, would view the appeal as one aimed at a very large proportion of the public.

For the remaining conditions, we chose groups carefully to maximize the believability of the appeal but also generate variance on the extent to which the appeal might appear to come from an atypical source. For example, a Republican appeal to religious conservatives might be expected while the same appeal from a Democratic candidate might be considered more unusual, but still believable. Many Democratic candidates, particularly those in southern and Midwestern districts, make direct appeals for support from religious conservatives. An interest in maintaining believability is, for example, what led us to choose Latinos rather than African Americans as one of our groups. Republicans have generally conceded the African American vote to Democrats in recent decades while competition for the Latino vote has been more intense. Likewise, while Democrats generally perform better among union members

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<sup>3</sup>With the two manipulations, this experiment amounted to a 4X2 design, producing 8 separate conditions. The text for each condition is presented in Appendix 1.

<sup>4</sup>For example, a poll conducted in January, 2011 by the Washington Post asked respondents whether they considered themselves part of the upper, upper-middle, middle, lower-middle, or lower class. 43% of respondents placed themselves in the middle-class, while another 43% identified as either upper-middle or lower-middle class. Thus, as much as 86% of adult Americans would view themselves as the target of a message directed at the middle class.

than Republicans, Republicans have made appeals for union votes and often make inroads among these voters.

In the following section, we begin by analyzing how respondents were affected by each of the experimental conditions. We then refine our analysis to examine whether appeals had different effects depending on whether a respondent was a member of the group being targeted. For this part of the analysis, we focus on the three more narrow groups—religious conservatives, union members, and Latinos. We use questions from the CCES to determine whether an individual belonged to any of these three groups. Identifying members of the Latino group is straightforward, but the other two groups warrant some elaboration.<sup>5</sup> We define union members as any individual who currently belongs to a union. About 7% of the sample fit this description. Of course, this group could be defined more broadly by including anyone who resides with an individual who belongs to a union. However, we elected for the narrower definition since union members themselves would be most likely to respond to a union-centered appeal.<sup>6</sup>

Defining “religious conservatives” is even more difficult. Several different approaches are possible, but we ultimately settled on a measure that indicates whether an individual is a born again Christian. We chose this definition because born-again Christians have increasingly come to symbolize the religious conservative movement in American politics (Layman (2001)). In our sample, 32% identified themselves as born again Christians.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Approximately 7% of our sample identify as Hispanics.

<sup>6</sup>Our findings are findings do not change substantively when we used the union household definition instead.

<sup>7</sup>Fortunately, the CCES includes a number of different ways to define one’s religiosity, including questions asking respondents how important religion is to their lives, how frequently they pray, and how often they attend church. Our findings are robust regardless of which of these variables we employ to identify more religious respondents.

## Results

Figure 1 presents the average likelihood of supporting the congressional candidate depending on which party the respondent was told the candidate belonged to and which group he appealed to.<sup>8</sup> The figure also shows 95% confidence intervals corresponding to these mean values. Regardless of party, a candidate who vowed to work on behalf of the middle class performed significantly better than a candidate who made an appeal to a narrower group. Mean support for this candidate was near the mid-point of the scale regardless of which party he was assigned to. As expected, overall support for the candidate dropped when he made an appeal to one of the narrower constituencies. With one exception, the mean likelihood of support decreased to approximately 30 (on the 100 point scale) under these conditions.

The exception to this pattern is also the one case in which we observed different reactions depending on the party of the respondent. When appealing to the middle class, unions, and Latinos, a Democratic candidate was viewed similarly to a Republican. However, appeals to religious conservatives had different effects depending on the party of the candidate. When Williams was described as a Republican appealing to religious conservatives, the mean likelihood of support was 40.5 points; however, when Williams was a Democrat making the same appeal, his average support was just 23.4. A difference of means test indicates that we can be very confident in this difference ( $p < .001$ ) and the size of this effect is large. Democrats are penalized much more than Republicans when they make appeals to religious conservatives.

In addition to simply examining the mean value on the scale for each of the conditions, it is also instructive to consider the distribution of responses across the scale. Figure 2 presents this information in the form of kernel density plots. The plot on the left shows the distribution of respondents on the scale when the candidate was a Democrat while the plot on the right shows the same information when Williams was described as a Republican. Note

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<sup>8</sup>Sampling weights are applied for all analyses.

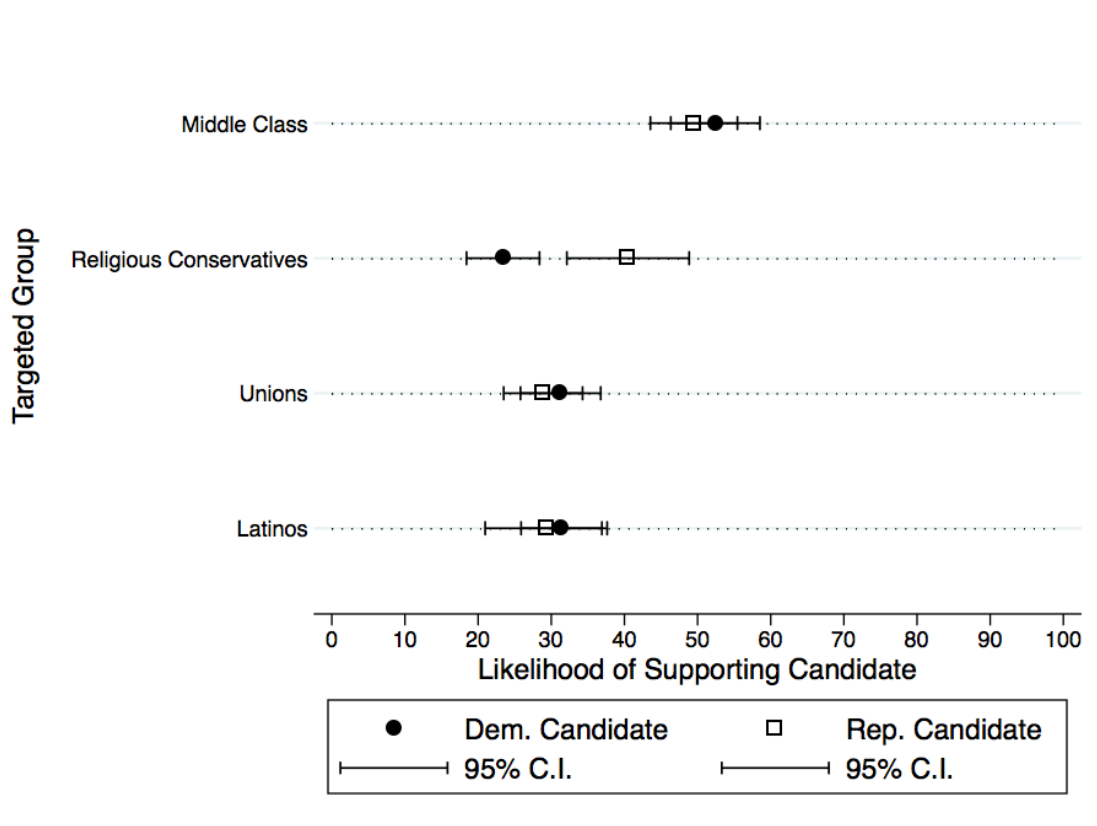


Figure 1: Average Support for Congressional Candidate Depending on Party and Type of Appeal

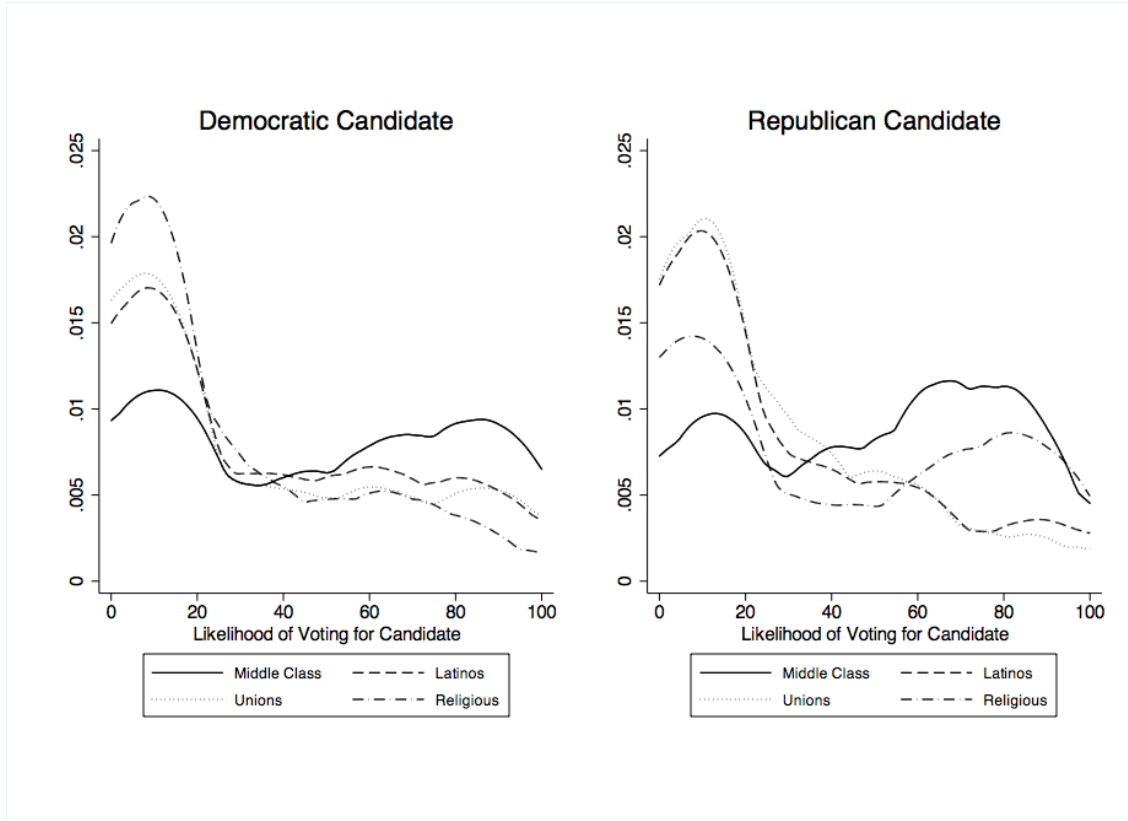


Figure 2: Kernel Density Plots Showing Support for Congressional Candidate Depending on Party and Type of Appeal

that the distribution of responses for an appeal to the middle class is somewhat bi-modal for both Democratic and Republican candidates. This reflects the fact that partisans tend to indicate higher support for a candidate from their own party and lower support for a candidate from the other party.

Notably, the bi-modality of the distribution generally disappears when the candidate makes an appeal to a narrower group. In each of these cases, values become concentrated at the low end of the likelihood scale. However, the magnitude of the concentration of values on this end of the scale depends on the party of the candidate and the group being targeted. When a Democrat makes an appeal to religious conservatives, most respondents place their likelihood of voting for that candidate near “very unlikely.” However, while many

respondents also cluster near the low end of the scale when a Republican candidate makes the same appeal, a smaller proportion do so. There is also some clustering near the high end of the scale for a Republican making an appeal to religious conservatives a pattern that does not hold for a Democrat making the same appeal.

Thus, a simple comparison of the means and distributions of responses demonstrates that candidates from both parties would generally fare better by making an appeal to the middle class rather than one to a narrower subgroup. Of course, candidates often do not have to make such a choice. Instead, they may choose to make broad middle class appeals when their statements will reach a more heterogeneous audience while they may appeal to smaller subgroups when they are able to ensure that only members of that subgroup will receive the message. Thus, while the analysis of responses among all respondents is instructive, it is only part of the story; it is also important to understand how the groups to whom these messages are targeted react.

### **Effect of Targeted Appeals on Groups**

To determine the extent to which targeted appeals generate more support among their intended audiences, we estimate an ordinary least squares regression model. The dependent variable in this model is the respondent's likelihood of voting for Williams (on the 0 to 100 scale). We control for the respondent's partisanship using a seven-point scale ranging from "strong Democrat" (coded 1) to "strong Republican" (coded 7). Indicators for each of the experimental conditions are also included in the model, including whether Williams was described as a Democrat (or Republican) and whether the appeal was to Latinos, unions, or religious conservatives (the middle class appeal is the omitted category). We also include indicators of whether the respondent is Hispanic, a member of a labor union, and/or a born again Christian. Since partisans are more likely to vote for a candidate who shares their party, we also interact the variable for the respondent's partisanship with the variable

indicating whether Williams was a Democrat or Republican.

To determine whether group members are more likely to support a candidate when he makes an appeal to that group, we include interaction terms between the indicators for whether the respondent belongs to the particular group and whether the respondent received an appeal to that particular group. For example, one interaction term is the product of whether the respondent identified as Hispanic and whether he/she received an appeal to Latinos. To determine whether an appeal is more credible coming from a candidate of a particular party, we interact each indicator for the type of appeal a respondent received with the variable indicating which party the appeal came from. We also include a three-way interaction term between the indicators for the respondent's group membership, the type of appeal the respondent received, and the party of the candidate offering the appeal to determine whether members of the targeted group are more or less influenced by appeals coming from a particular party.

The estimates from this ordinary least squares regression model are presented in the first column in Table 1. The partisanship variables and the interaction terms are all statistically significant indicating that, all things equal, individuals preferred the candidate when he was described as sharing their party affiliations. For example, strong Democrats rated their likelihood of voting for Williams (on average) at 56.11 when Williams was described as a Democrat, but strong Republicans rated their likelihood of voting for him at just 12.55 under the same condition. The effect was not quite as strong when Williams was described as a Republican—strong Democrats rated their likelihood of voting for the Republican candidate at 27.08 (on average), while Republicans rated their likelihood of voting for the Republican Williams at 47.30.

The remaining coefficients in the table indicate whether group appeals affected how individuals rated the candidate and the extent to which the effect of the appeal was conditioned by the respondent's membership in the targeted group or the party of the candidate making



Table 1: Regression Models Testing Effects of Type and Source of Appeal on Members of Targeted Groups

Independent Variables	All Respondents	Activists	Independents/Leaners
R's Partisanship	3.869 (.585)***	3.025 (.715)***	8.647 (2.268)***
Appeal from Dem. Cand.	43.155 (4.976)***	48.836 (6.319)***	81.283 (14.883)***
Dem. Cand. X Partisanship	-11.130 (.802)***	-11.804 (1.000)***	-20.623 (3.300)***
Appeal to Latinos	-22.198 (5.114)***	-18.778 (4.732)***	-6.486 (9.260)
R is Hispanic	.135 (4.514)	-2.741 (3.888)	12.079 (11.893)
Latinos Appeal X Hispanic	39.739 (12.960)***	37.362 (26.342)	-40.715 (14.507)***
Dem. Cand. X Latino Appeal	3.050 (6.328)	11.832 (5.979)**	-13.149 (10.837)
Dem. Cand. X Latino Appeal X Hispanic	-20.557 (13.564)	-21.663 (26.611)	76.044 (15.287)***
Appeal to Unions	-21.584 (4.363)***	-13.502 (5.392)**	-18.242 (6.700)***
R is Union Member	1.415 (3.395)	-5.749 (4.180)	2.206 (5.467)
Union Appeal X Union Member	8.148 (8.584)	18.526 (17.142)	3.322 (10.899)
Dem. Cand. X Union Appeal	3.311 (5.439)	2.361 (6.512)	2.976 (8.693)
Dem. Cand. X Union Appeal X Union Member	16.487 (12.436)	4.956 (19.249)	23.787 (19.530)
Religious Appeal	-29.772 (3.877)***	-18.737 (4.642)***	-28.887 (5.538)***
R is Born Again	-4.692 (2.347)**	-5.088 (2.658)*	-1.670 (4.050)
Religious Appeal X Born Again	52.349 (4.968)***	57.180 (6.478)***	55.512 (7.642)***
Dem. Cand. X Religious Appeal	-6.091 (5.416)	-10.821 (7.751)	-1.479 (8.829)
Dem. Cand. X Religious Appeal X Born Again	-26.233 (7.344)***	-39.450 (10.275)***	-28.184 (12.480)**
Intercept	36.293 (3.981)***	32.674 (4.785)***	11.181 (9.865)
N	1791	799	648
R <sup>2</sup>	.357	.436	.341

the appeal. In each case, the coefficient for the appeal is statistically significant and negative, confirming what we show in Figure 1—candidates making appeals to the middle class tend to fare better than those making appeals to narrower groups. However, several of the interaction terms are also statistically significant, indicating that the effect of the appeal is not uniform for all individuals.

Since the effects of these interaction terms are difficult to sort out simply by glancing at the coefficients in Table 1, Figure 3 presents the predicted likelihood of support (on the same 0 to 100 scale) among members of each of the targeted groups depending on whether members of that group received an appeal to their narrower group or to the broader appeal to the middle class. Reactions to appeals from Democratic candidates are shown separately from those coming from Republican candidates and all predictions are presented with 95% confidence intervals.<sup>9</sup>

The findings presented in Figure 3 demonstrate the limited effectiveness of targeted messages to subgroups. For example, the left panel shows that when a Democrat appeals to religious conservatives, unions, or Latinos he performs no better than if he made an appeal to the middle class. For each of these groups, the means are located close together and the confidence intervals almost entirely overlap. For a Republican candidate, the effects are a bit more nuanced. The Republican fares worse among union members when appealing to unions rather to the middle class and better among Hispanics when appealing to Latinos rather than the middle class, but in both cases the confidence intervals overlap and we cannot be confident in the differences between the predictions. The one instance in which a targeted appeal does lead to statistically higher support among the targeted group is when a Republican vows to work on behalf of “religious conservatives.” A born-again Christian hearing such an appeal becomes over 20 points more likely to support the candidate compared to when that same individual hears an appeal to the middle class. The difference in these

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<sup>9</sup>The predictions are generated setting partisanship at the value 4, which represents a true independent.

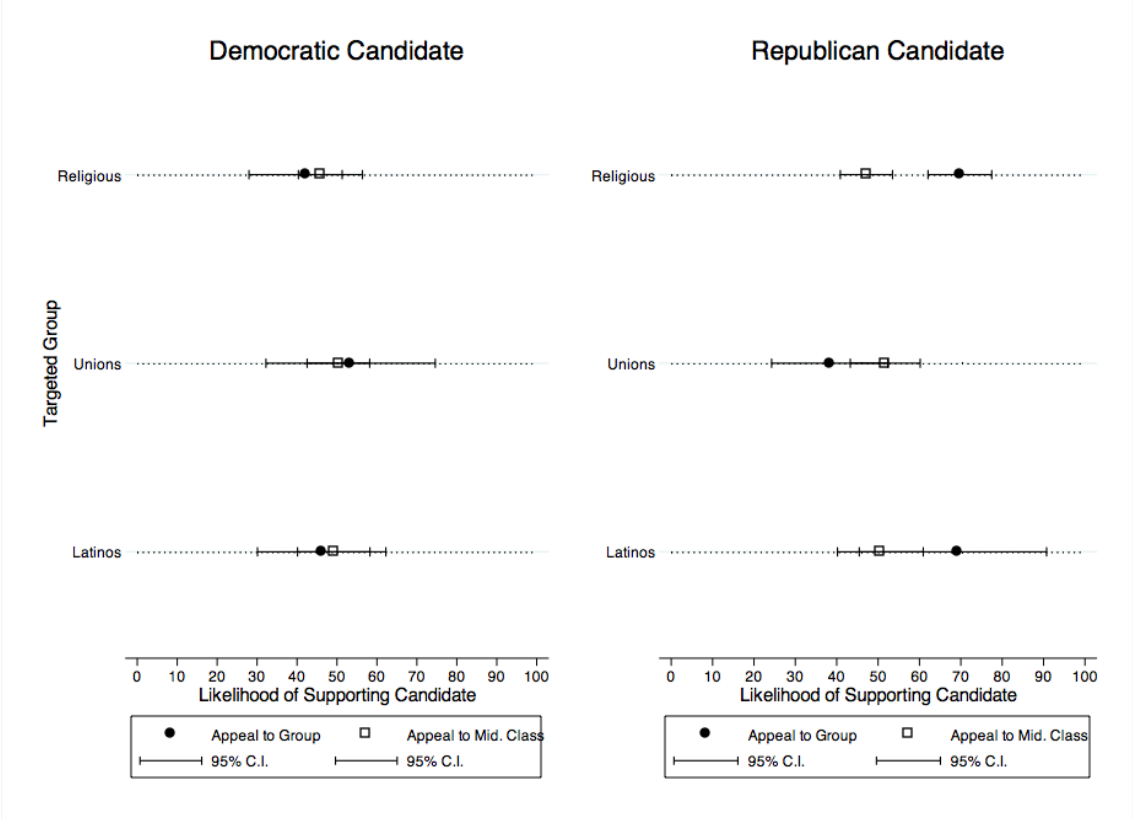


Figure 3: Support for Congressional Candidate Depending on Whether Respondent Belongs to Targeted Group

predictions is highly significant and the magnitude amounts to more than one-fifth of the entire range of the scale—a substantial increase in support.

So far, our results indicate that targeted appeals only increase support for Republican candidates among born again Christians and appear to offer little advantage over broader-based appeals among Latinos and members of labor unions. However, it may be the case that such targeted appeals are really meant to motivate activists rather than persuade the typical voter. To examine this possibility, we limited our analysis to political activists. Specifically, the CCES asked respondents whether they had attended local political meetings, put up a political sign, worked for a candidate or campaign, or donated money to a candidate or campaign. We classified an individual as an activist when he or she participated in at least one of these four activities in 2010. By this standard, activists comprise approximately one-third of the sample (33.7%).

The second column in Table 1 presents the results from the analysis of activists. Figure 4 follows the format of Figure 3 by plotting predictions from the activists-only model. Notably, there are few differences between the findings presented in the two figures. Even among activists, candidates do not fare significantly better among narrower groups by making specific appeals to those groups relative to how they would fare by making a broad appeal to the middle class. As with the results for all adults, the single exception is among born again Christian activists. Republicans fare significantly better with born again activists when they make an appeal to “religious conservatives” rather than the “middle class.” This effect is even larger than it was in the more inclusive model—born again Christian activists are about 40 points more likely to support a Republican making an appeal to religious conservatives than they are to support a Republican appealing to the middle class.

The other possibility is that targeted messages are intended for persuadable voters (Hillygus and Shields 2008). If this is the case, then we would expect to find the biggest effects for these targeted appeals among citizens who are less likely to be strongly committed to a

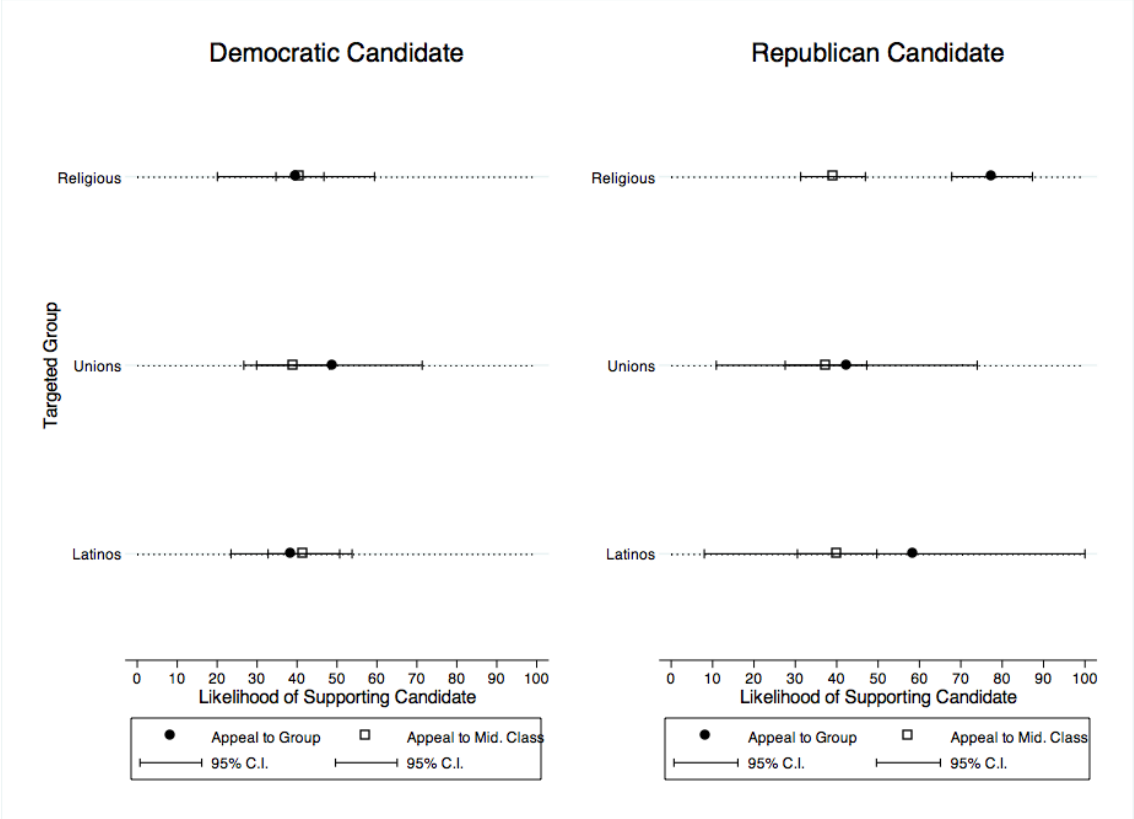


Figure 4: Support for Congressional Candidate Among Political Activists Depending on Whether Activist Belongs to Targeted Group

particular party. To examine whether targeted messages had a stronger effect among this group, we limited the analysis to respondents who identified either as pure independents or as leaning toward one party of the other. Nearly 40% of the sample fit this description.

The third column in Table 1 shows the estimates from this model and, as with the other analyses, we present the predicted values in Figure 5. Many of the patterns from the previous figures are repeated here, though there are also some notable differences. First, persuadable Hispanics in our sample are much more likely to vote for a Democrat who makes an appeal to Latinos than one who appeals to the middle class. However, because of the small proportion of Hispanics in these conditions, the confidence intervals overlap and we cannot be confident in this difference. Persuadable Hispanics also behave differently when the appeal comes from a Republican candidate. When a Republican candidate makes an appeal to Latinos, persuadable Hispanics are much less likely to support that candidate than if the Republican makes a middle class appeal. In this case, the confidence intervals do not overlap, indicating that we can be confident that this difference would exist among the population of persuadable Hispanics.

Other findings in Figure 5 mirror those from the earlier models. A Democratic candidate does not perform better among persuadable born again Christians or union members when he makes a narrow group-based appeal to those groups instead of a broad middle class appeal. And as with the other analyses, the Republican candidate fares much better among born again Christians when appealing to religious conservatives rather than the middle class.

## **Discussion**

Overall, several notable results arise from our analysis. First, narrower group-based appeals to Latinos, unions, or religious conservatives appear to generate no more support for a Democratic candidate among members of the targeted group than a broad middle-class appeal. It is not particularly surprising to find that born again Christians were not more

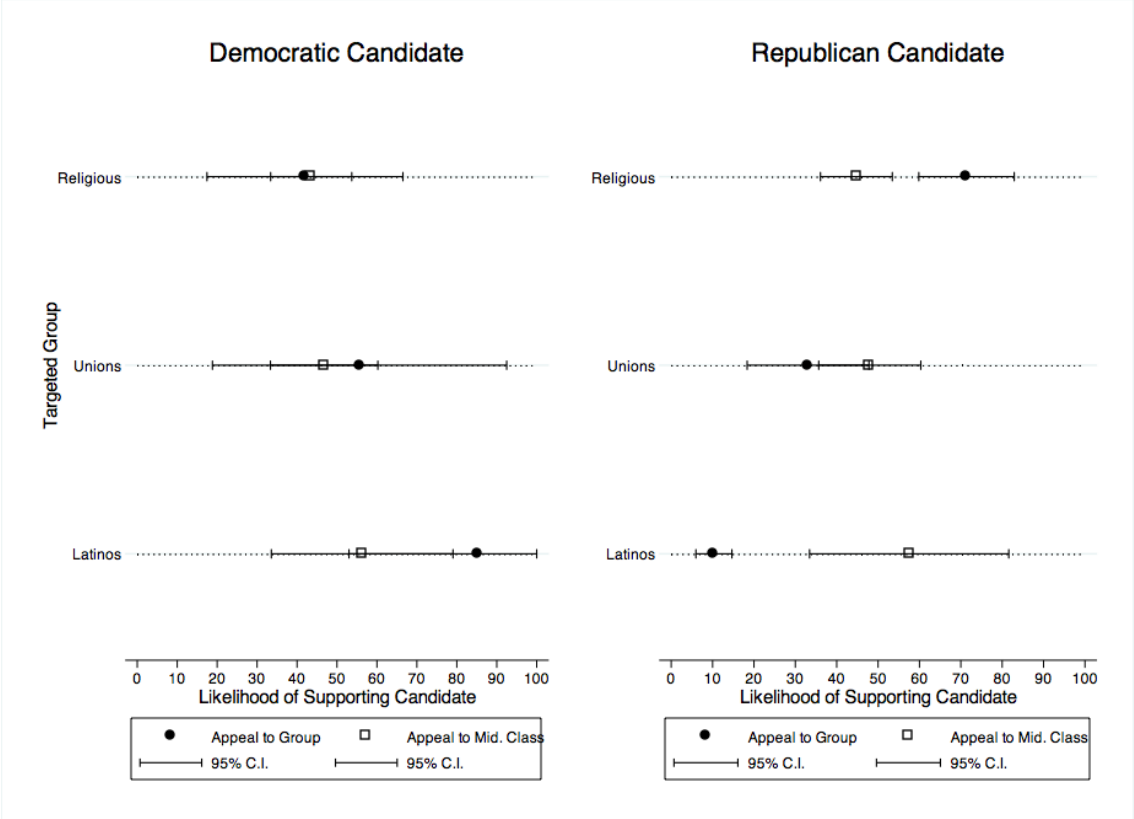


Figure 5: Support for Congressional Candidate Among Independents and Partisan Leaners Depending on Whether Individual Belongs to Targeted Group

likely to vote for a Democrat who made an appeal to work on behalf of religious conservatives. After all, members of this group may view such promises as “cheap talk” given the party of the source. Nevertheless, given that there is no benefit for such an appeal among the targeted group and overall support for the Democrat drops by half when he makes this appeal, there appears to be little reason for Democratic candidates to target religious conservatives, even with targeted appeals.

More surprising is the lack of a response from Hispanics and union members to appeals made to those groups by a Democratic candidate. We expected a Democratic appeal to these groups to generate more support among group members since the appeal should have been viewed as more credible. It may be that Hispanics and union members already assume that a Democrat will be working for their interests in office, so claims to that effect do not carry any additional weight. It may also be the case that the sense of group identity among members of these groups is not particularly strong; if these ties are not as strong, then members of those groups would be less responsive to group-based appeals (Rodriguez (2000); Jones-Correa and Leal (1996)). Whatever the reason, our analysis demonstrates that there is little reason for a Democrat to make targeted appeals to the narrower groups—those appeals do not generate more support among the targeted group and they eroded support for the candidate among non-targeted citizens.

While targeted appeals from the Democrat were generally ineffective, the same appeals made by the Republican candidate sometimes produced the intended effect. This was particularly true for born again Christians, where Republicans performed substantially better when vowing to work on behalf of religious conservatives rather than the middle class. Indeed, a Republican appealing to religious conservatives fared about 30 points better among born again Christians than a Democrat making the same appeal. It appears as though born again Christians viewed the appeal as much more credible when it came from a Republican candidate rather than a Democrat.



The effectiveness of targeted appeals was less clear among the other two groups. Republicans fared worse among union members when making an appeal to unions, but this difference was not large and we cannot be confident that it is statistically significant. When appealing to Latinos, Republicans fared about 20 points better among Hispanics in the sample compared to making an appeal to the middle class. However, because of the small number of Hispanics in our sample, we cannot be confident in this difference either.

Thus, in most cases, targeted appeals did not pay off for the candidate. The lack of effect for these appeals is especially surprising given the low-information nature of the decision being made by respondents in this experiment. Individuals were given only the party of the candidate and an appeal to a particular group. When people operate in a low-information environment, they tend to react strongly to new pieces of information (Monday (1993)). Yet, in this experiment, there was generally little reaction to the appeal being made by the candidate, at least among members of the targeted group.

This lack of effect may speak to the meaning and power of the party labels for each of the groups we examined. Indeed, the party labels themselves hold a great deal of information for citizens seeking to make inferences about where a candidate might stand on issues and the extent to which the candidate might represent the views of different groups (Rahn (1993); Schaffner and Streb (2002)). For example, union members may simply assume that a Democratic candidate would represent their interests so additional appeals to that effect would do little to generate more support for the Democrat. Likewise, born again Christians may assume that a Democratic candidate is unlikely to represent their views, and a claim from the Democrat to the contrary may not be sufficiently powerful to overcome the strength of the cues offered by the party label.

This explanation may also lend insight into why the strongest targeting effect occurred for Republican appeals to religious conservatives. Since born again Christians may view their agenda as being supported by some, but by no means all, Republican politicians, a

Republican party label may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for support. In other words, Republican candidates may need to make targeted appeals to religious conservatives to demonstrate that they are the kind of Republican who will support a conservative agenda on social issues.

## Conclusion

The study of campaign effects has been notoriously difficult, particularly with regard to analyzing the influence of targeted campaign messages (Arceneaux (Forthcoming)). By utilizing a survey experiment, we were able to remove concerns about endogeneity and selection bias to gain a better understanding of the effects that targeted messages have on their intended audiences as well as those for whom the message would not be intended. In general, our findings speak to the limitations of targeted group-based pandering. In most cases, candidates did no better among group members by appealing directly to that group's identity. Furthermore, these narrower appeals come with risks as such appeals led to diminished support for the candidate among non-group members. In tandem, these findings suggest a puzzle—given the small payoffs and high risks, why do candidates engage in targeted pandering at all?

Rather than question the competence of the campaign consultants who promote targeted strategies, we point to several possible reasons for why candidates target narrow groups. First, not all groups were unresponsive to this pandering. In fact, appealing to religious conservatives appears to hold the promise of a large payoff for Republican candidates, as long as those messages are not transmitted to the general public. Second, it is also important to note that our study focused on persuasion rather than mobilization. Many scholars have argued that the main goal of targeted messages is to mobilize supporters rather than persuade uncommitted voters (e.g. Holbrook and McClurg (2005)). It may be the case that the targeted appeals we examined here would have made respondents more likely to vote,

even if they did not make them more likely to vote for a particular candidate. Third, the appeal in our experiment was rather minor compared to the magnitude of direct mail and phone calls that a targeted voter might be exposed to by a campaign. Furthermore, the appeal in our experiment was vague and not specifically policy-oriented, which might have also served to mute its effect.

Nevertheless, our findings do lend important evidence to the (so far) limited body of research examining the effects and consequences of targeted campaigns. Hillygus and Shields (2008) argue that targeting poses a threat to American democracy because many of the claims and promises made by the candidates can be hidden from the view of a majority of the public. Of course, candidates do not publicize their targeted messages, so it can be challenging to determine whether targeted appeals would really turn off the broader electorate. We designed our study specifically to test this claim and our results lend credence to the concerns of Hillygus and Shields. Regardless of whether a targeted appeal generated more support for a candidate among the intended group, the candidate always lost support when this appeal was seen by those outside of that group. Thus, the fact that campaigns now have the ability to make specific claims to narrow groups without being penalized by other portions of the electorate is a legitimate concern for the Democratic system.

## Appendix: Description of Experimental Conditions

Targeted Group	Democratic Candidate	Republican Candidate
Middle Class	Williams is a Democrat running for the U.S. House of Representatives in 2010. During the campaign, he vowed to “work hard on behalf of the middle class” if he was elected to office. If you lived in Williams’s district, how inclined would you be to vote for him.	Williams is a Republican running for the U.S. House of Representatives in 2010. During the campaign, he vowed to “work hard on behalf of the middle class” if he was elected to office. If you lived in Williams’s district, how inclined would you be to vote for him.
Religious Conservatives	Williams is a Democrat running for the U.S. House of Representatives in 2010. During the campaign, he vowed to “work hard on behalf of religious conservatives” if he was elected to office. If you lived in Williams’s district, how inclined would you be to vote for him.	Williams is a Republican running for the U.S. House of Representatives in 2010. During the campaign, he vowed to “work hard on behalf of religious conservatives” if he was elected to office. If you lived in Williams’s district, how inclined would you be to vote for him.
Unions	Williams is a Democrat running for the U.S. House of Representatives in 2010. During the campaign, he vowed to “work hard on behalf of unions” if he was elected to office. If you lived in Williams’s district, how inclined would you be to vote for him.	Williams is a Republican running for the U.S. House of Representatives in 2010. During the campaign, he vowed to “work hard on behalf of unions” if he was elected to office. If you lived in Williams’s district, how inclined would you be to vote for him.
Latinos	Williams is a Democrat running for the U.S. House of Representatives in 2010. During the campaign, he vowed to “work hard on behalf of Latinos” if he was elected to office. If you lived in Williams’s district, how inclined would you be to vote for him.	Williams is a Republican running for the U.S. House of Representatives in 2010. During the campaign, he vowed to “work hard on behalf of Latinos” if he was elected to office. If you lived in Williams’s district, how inclined would you be to vote for him.

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