When is Pandering Persuasive?
The Effects of Targeted Group-Based Appeals

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Abstract

Political campaigns increasingly micro-target appeals to voters. Given detailed knowledge of voters’ identities, campaigns try to persuade voters by pandering to these identities. Through two survey experiments, we examine the persuasiveness of group-directed pandering. We ask: do group-members respond more favorably to appeals geared to them, or do they prefer to hear broad-based appeals? Does the effectiveness of group-directed pandering depend on the group that is targeted and on the party doing the targeting? Do voters not in a group penalize candidates who appeal to a group? Answers to these questions help us grapple with the evolving relationship between voters and candidates in a rapidly changing information environment. Whether or not micro-targeting “works” bears on the nature of political representation. After all, a coalition of voters built by quietly promising narrow benefits to narrow audiences implies a very different kind of democracy than a coalition built on broad principles and collective benefits.
Introduction

No one living in the Information Age can easily escape being targeted. Websites we visit track our clicks, companies we do business with sell information about our habits, and in exchange for discounts we allow supermarkets and pharmacies to peer into our consumer lives. Like commercial targeting, the targeting of political appeals to particular sets of voters raises concerns about privacy and the attenuation of information flows (Sunstein (2007)). But political targeting invokes a whole other set of normative questions about the health of a democracy: Does targeting technology allow politicians to make secret promises to particular voters? Does targeting enable politicians to restrict the set of constituents they pay attention to? This line of questioning merits attention because politicians, like marketers, are increasingly leveraging new data and technology to narrowcast their appeals (Hillygus and Shields (2008)). Or, at least, they are trying to narrowcast their appeals. The fact is that neither researchers nor campaigns themselves know very much about how well microtargeting works at persuading voters (Grossmann (2009)). The evidence we present here from two survey experiments sheds light on the effectiveness of targeting. In doing so, it helps us grapple with the evolving relationship between voters and candidates in a rapidly segmenting information environment. If we can learn more about the effectiveness of micro-targeting, we will have a better sense of the gravity of the associated normative questions about democracy in an era of abundant information.

While a growing body of research examines the extent to which candidates target their messages to particular subgroups (e.g. Hillygus and Shields (2008)) 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 difficult to understand from observational studies since targeting allows candidates to select messages they expect members of the targeted group
to be responsive to, resulting in endogeneity problems (Arceneaux (2010)). Making research on targeting even more challenging is that when campaigns send hidden messages to voters, by definition they do not want these messages to be publicized (not even for the benefit of political science research).

In this paper, we use survey experiments to gain a foothold on how targeted appeals to narrow groups provide (or fail to provide) candidates with an advantage over the use of broad appeals. We also explore the mechanisms by which voters’ attitudes change in response to particularized forms of pandering. The experimental design allows us to fully randomize both the group to which candidates make an appeal (either the middle class, religious conservatives, Latinos, or unions) and the source of the appeal (a Democratic or Republican candidate). Compared to a general appeal to “the middle class,” we find that targeted appeals to particular groups do little to increase support for the candidate among the targeted groups. Furthermore, citizens who do not belong to the targeted groups penalize a candidate if they receive an appeal not meant for them. Thus, given the inevitably imperfect information that candidates have about which voters will be responsive to which specific appeals, it appears that targeted messages may backfire on campaigns and provide worse outcomes to the campaigns than general appeals.

The two important exceptions are for Republican appeals to religious conservatives and Latinos. In our experiments, respondents identifying as born-again Christians preferred Republican candidates who targeted their appeals to religious conservatives as compared with Republican candidates who targeted their appeals to the middle class. A similar pattern was evident for Latinos. On balance, targeted pandering may not be generally as effective as is often assumed, but among certain groups and in certain contexts, such pandering can produce significant returns. As with most political strategies, targeting is not universally a good choice or bad choice for campaigns. However, if candidates can find individuals who consistently respond well to particularized messages and also can be accurately identified in
a voter database, then they may pursue a successful micro-targeting campaign. The result could be a form of democratic representation in which politicians make selective promises to selective groups and form pluralities of factions rather than a system that values collective promises directed to the commonwealth.

At the outset, we emphasize that this is a study that explores the persuasive effects of targeted messages, not the mobilizing effects. Much of political campaign targeting may be designed to demonstrate to particular groups the importance of voting in an upcoming election by invoking the group’s connection with a candidate or party. This kind of mobilization targeting is likely to ramp up in the last week or two of a campaign. However, political campaigns reach out to voters months ahead of elections with targeted appeals, and these appeals are designed with the intention of persuasion. Thus, in this brief analysis, we confine ourselves to these persuasive effects and leave the study of mobilizing effects to others (e.g. Green and Gerber (2008)).

The Shift to Targeted Appeals

During the past two decades, candidates have become increasingly adept at identifying voter types and sending tailored messages to those different types. 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 (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 access 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
Companies like Catalist and the Voter Activation Network have since emerged to provide candidates nationwide with the ability to target voters based on individual-level demographic, geographic, and party-generated data. Though it is true that micro-targeting databases are not as helpful to candidates and not as well-utilized by candidates as is often presumed by media reports [Hersh (2010)], it is doubtless the case that candidates, like marketers, are increasingly employing individual-level voter data to identify key constituencies. The question is: How useful is their newfound knowledge of voters’ demographic and geographic profiles in crafting messages that translate into support?

While the effect of actual targeted campaign messages has been challenging to analyze, a handful of studies have provided some insight as to the content of actual targeted appeals. For example, [Hillygus and Shields (2008)] examine direct mail 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.

The fact that candidates craft different messages for targeted media than they do for mass media suggests that candidates 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 such, the message may have a less potent impact on any given voter. When messages can be hidden from all but the intended recipients, candidates might craft messages to be more pointed and, therefore, perhaps more influential on that smaller group of voters. However, no research to date indicates whether this scheme actually works. Micro-targeting is easier said than done. Campaigns can compose lists of voters they think will be positively responsive to appeals, but as [Hersh (2010)] notes, oftentimes such target lists include a large number of false positives.
- voters who appear to campaigns to be responsive to an appeal but actually do not possess the characteristics that the politicians are hoping to target. Thus, two distinct phenomena might cut against a politician’s ability to target: a.) voters may not prefer targeted messages to broad messages, and b.) voters who are accidentally targeted may penalize candidates for making a misguided appeal.

**Identifying the Persuasive Effects of Targeting**

Political science research on the influence of campaign messages has focused primarily 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); Huber and Arceneaux (2007); Gerber et al. (2011)).

Since targeted appeals are often difficult for political scientists to observe, and causal inference with observational data is challenging, analyzing the effects of targeted messages is no easy task. 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. 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, Rips and Shevell (1987); Ansolabehere, Iyengar and Simon (1999)). Furthermore, even if it was possible to reliably observe the targeted messages that individuals receive during campaigns, to distinguish the effects of those messages would still be difficult, since campaigns strategically send messages to individuals who are likely to be most influenced by those messages, thereby introducing selection bias.

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)). Hillygus and Monson (n.d.) find that targeted mail and phone calls have a minor influence on vote choice while Arceneaux (2007) uncovers a much larger effect of canvassing on candidate support. While these studies provide preliminary evidence that targeted appeals can be effective, questions remain about how and on whom targeted appeals work.

Whether or not targeting “works” matters because if candidates can successfully target messages to particular groups, this could reshape the relationship between voters and politicians. On the positive side, when politicians know more about voters, they can pay attention to citizen preferences with a level of specificity that was not before possible. Targeting, in this sense, means politicians know more about what each voter cares about. On the negative side, when politicians know more they may find it desirable to make narrow promises from which the general public does not benefit. Of course, politicians have always been able to make narrow promises to their donors and personal associates, but if voter targeting “works,” then politicians can cut up the entire electorate into narrow sub-divisions and provide enough particularized benefits to each group to put together a winning coalition. Perhaps more troubling is that such narrow coalition-building would not be transparent to other voters. A coalition of voters built quietly by promising narrow benefits to narrow audiences implies a very different kind of democracy than a coalition of voters built on broad principles and collective benefits. Thus, the effectiveness of targeting is not merely a logistical question of interest to campaign operatives; it can influence the nature of representation in a democracy.
Why Might a Pander Succeed or Fail?

We articulate three sets of questions about the effectiveness of targeting that our survey experiments begin to answer: First, are targeted messages more effective than general appeals? Though candidates can send group-specific messages via targeted media, it is not clear whether these narrower messages are any more effective than broad-based appeals. It may be that group members do not always react more positively to appeals to their 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, in messaging to Latinos, a targeted appeal may be no more successful than a more general appeal to workers or to the middle class.

Second, do appeals to particular groups work more or less effectively depending on the candidate’s political 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). Candidates may have more success with appeals to groups that are typically part of their party’s coalition than they will when trying to make targeted appeals to groups that usually support the opposing party. For example, a Democrat making an appeal to 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 Democratic candidate would have.

Third, will individuals who are not members of the targeted group penalize a candidate for appealing to that group? Since candidates tend to send different types of messages in targeted media than they do in mass media, it is evident that at least some candidates believe that narrower (group-based) appeals would cost them support among non-group members. At a minimum, seeing a candidate target a group to which one does not belong may offer
a cue about the policies the candidate would support once in office or may lead a voter to think the candidate will prioritize an out-group over his or her own kind.

**Mechanisms of Pandering Effects: Theoretical Motivation**

If pandering influences support for candidates, it likely does so because it provides citizens with new information about the candidates’ priorities. Party labels hold information for citizens seeking to make inferences about a candidate’s policies ([Rahn (1993); Schaffner and Streh (2002)]), but group-based panders, when they work, may provide additional clarity to these assumptions. For example, born-again Christians may view their agenda as being supported by some, but not all, Republican politicians; thus, a Republican party label may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for support. If a Republican candidate panders to religious conservatives, it can send a signal that the candidate will be particularly conservative on social issues. But group-based appeals may not have any effect on a voter’s opinion of the candidate if the appeal provides no more information than could already be surmised by the candidate’s party label. For example, union members may already assume that the typical Democrat will support their interests if elected. Thus, if a union member hears a message from a Democratic candidate stating that the candidate supports unions, this appeal would not lead her to update her assumptions.

Group-based pandering has the potential to be informative in some cases; but this potential can only be realized if the panders are accepted as credible. The problem candidates face with targeted pandering is that the messages might easily be dismissed by members of the group being targeted as “cheap talk.” Messages tend to be taken more seriously by individuals when the sender must pay some cost for sending those messages. These costs can include the price of the medium used to convey the message, but more significant are the political costs a candidate might incur making a particular promise. If a candidate states a commitment to support a narrow group in a message that reaches a heterogenous audi-
ence, it is possible that the appeal will be perceived negatively by many members of that audience who are not being pandered to. The candidate is also publicly on the record with the commitment and can more easily be held accountable. For these reasons, a campaign promise conveyed through targeting is a less costly appeal than a promise conveyed to a general audience.

Targeting allows candidates to reduce the potential costs of group-based pandering by hiding the message from citizens who are not part of the group. But since a targeted pander is less costly, it may also be viewed as less credible by members of the group who receive it. For example, if a Republican candidate panders to union members in a targeted mailer, union members may discount the message because they assume that the candidate is only willing to make those promises when other parts of his electoral coalition will be unaware of them. If, however, the Republican candidate broadcast the same appeal so that business leaders and other citizens were aware of it, that appeal would likely be viewed as more credible by union members.

While members of a group being targeted may assume that a pander was meant only for them, citizens hearing a pander for a group to which they do not belong may assume the message was broadcast widely. After all, how else would this non-group member receive the message? Presumably the voter would not know that he or she had been mis-targeted but rather understands the candidate to be stating a genuine priority. For example, if a non-union voter is told that a candidate prioritizes unions, the voter will assume this is a credible statement since it has the appearance of being broadcasted. For this reason we posit that voters receiving a message that panders to a group of which they are not part will tend to believe that the pander represents a credible commitment from the candidate. Because this commitment is not only credible but also seeks to advantage a group the voter is not a

\[1\] For relevant formal models of candidate credibility and pandering, consult Kartik and McAfee (2007) and Che, Dessein and Kartik (2010).
member of, we expect mis-targeted voters to penalize candidates.

Through the experiments to which we now turn, we gain insights about the questions and theoretical propositions we have articulated regarding whether targeting works better or worse than wholesale messaging, whether the effect of targeting depends on the group targeted and the party of the candidate, and whether mis-targeted voters penalize a candidate who expresses a commitment to a group to which they do not belong.

Experimental Design

Our primary experiment was conducted using a nationally representative sample of respondents on a module of the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). As a robustness check on the CCES results, we replicate the experimental design, with a few minor language modifications, on an Internet convenience sample. In this second experiment, we add survey questions that allow us to explore whether pandering provides voters with an informational cue and/or an express benefit for being part of a group that a candidate vows to represent.

Experiment 1: 2010 CCES

We embedded an experiment on a module of the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. The experiment was administered to 2,500 respondents during the pre-election wave of interviews (conducted throughout the month of October). 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

2Information about the CCES sampling procedure is available at http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cces/home. For a comparison of opt-in Internet sampling with telephone and mail studies, see Ansolabehere and Schaffner (N.d.).
place themselves on a scale ranging from “very unlikely to vote for him” on one extreme (coded 0) to “very likely to vote for him” on the other end of the scale (coded 100). Overall, there was significant variance in answers 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.[3]

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 read that Williams would work on behalf of one of four different groups—“the middle class,” “Latinos,” “Unions,” or “religious conservatives.”[4]

Any number of groups might have been chosen for the experimental conditions. We chose these groups for the following reasons. We chose “the middle class” 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.[5] 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 while also generating variance on the extent to which the appeal might appear to come from an atypical source. For example, a Republican appeal to religious conser-

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3Approximately 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.

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

5For 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. Eighty-six percent considered themselves in a middle-class category.
vatives 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 what led us, for example, 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 than Republicans, Republicans have made appeals for union votes and often make inroads among these voters.

For much of our analysis, we distinguish respondents who identify as members of a group that the candidate’s message targets. To do this, we focus on the three more narrow groups—religious conservatives, union members, and Latinos. Respondents who identified as Hispanic (7% of the sample) are taken to be potential targets of a Latino appeal. Respondents identifying as a union member or as living in the household of a union member (13% of the sample) are taken to be potential targets for a union appeal. Respondents identifying as born-again Christians (32% of the sample) are taken to be potential targets for an appeal to “religious conservatives,” since born-again Christians have increasingly come to symbolize the religious conservative movement in American politics (Layman (2001)).

Experiment 2: Convenience Sample of American Adults

We conducted a second experiment on a convenience sample of American adults with two goals in mind. First, we used this experiment to determine whether our findings from the first experiment were robust to some slight language changes. Specifically, we wondered

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6Results on union appeals are robust to an alternative specification in which only union members (rather than all respondents in union households) are considered to be in the targeted group. Results on appeals to religious conservatives are robust to an alternative specification in which questions about religiosity (e.g. frequency of prayer, church attendance) are utilized instead of identification as a born-again Christian.
whether the terms “middle class,” and “religious conservative” in the first experiment were too value-laden. Second, we used the second experiment to ask additional questions about the mechanisms underlying how (and on whom) pandering works.

The sample for this experiment was solicited from Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) website, which has become an affordable and accessible venue for recruiting subjects into social science surveys. MTurk has been found to be as good as or better than traditional convenience samples (Buhrmester, Kwang and Gosling (2011); Paolacci, Chandler and Ipeirotis (2010)) and Berinsky et al. note that MTurk respondents “appear to respond to canonical experimental stimuli in a manner consistent with prior research” (Berinsky and Lenz (N.d.), p. 17). We recruited 1,009 American adults from Mechanical Turk to complete a short survey on current events. Respondents received 50 cents for completing the brief survey. Overall, the sample was more female (56%) and more Democratic (40% Democrats, 17% Republicans) than the population of American adults. Nevertheless, we did generate sufficient variation on our key variables; 6% of our sample was Hispanic, 23% belonged to a union household, and 18% identified as born-again Christians.

We implemented a few changes to the conditions from the CCES experiment to explore the robustness of our findings. First, instead of using the “middle class” as the baseline condition in this experiment, we substituted a vow that Williams would “work hard on behalf of his constituents.” Since this appeal would include nearly everyone in the district, we expect it to be even more inclusive relative to the middle class appeal. Second, rather than using “religious conservatives” for the religious appeal, we had the candidate vow to work on behalf of “born-again Christians.” Another smaller change was that instead of respondents rating their likelihood of voting for Williams on a 0 to 100 scale, the Mechanical Turk subjects used a 1 to 9 scale.

Because the Mechanical Turk experiment utilized a smaller sample size, we routed subjects into the experimental conditions in a different way from the CCES to ensure maximum
statistical power. While every respondent to the CCES experiment had an equal chance of landing in each condition, the same was not true for this experiment. We began this survey by asking subjects a set of demographic questions, including whether they were Hispanic, whether they (or someone on in their household) was a member of a labor union, and whether they were a born-again Christian. If respondents answered that they were Hispanic, they were routed into a condition in which they could receive only the baseline appeal (to constituents) or the targeted appeal (to Latinos). If subjects were not Hispanic but were from a union household, they were routed into a condition in which they could receive either the baseline appeal or the appeal to unions. Finally, if subjects identified as born-again Christian (and not Hispanic or from a union household), they could only receive the baseline condition or the appeal to born-again Christians. Subjects who did not identify with any of those three groups were routed into a condition where they had an equal chance of receiving each appeal.\

The Advantages and Penalties for Pandering

Figure 1 presents the average likelihood of supporting the congressional candidate depending on the candidate’s party affiliation and his appeal. These results come from the CCES experiment, and below we describe how the results in the second experiment compare. 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. When the candidate made narrow appeals, overall support dropped about 20 points on this 100-point scale in all conditions except when the candidate was a Republican appealing to religious

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7 Of course, there was some overlap across groups. 20 respondents identified as both Hispanic and a member of a union household; 9 identified as both Hispanic and born-again; and 46 were both born-again and members of a union household. However, when we drop these individuals with multiple group identities from the analysis, our substantive findings do not change.

8 Sampling weights are applied for all analyses of the CCES data.
conservatives. The appeal to religious conservatives is distinctive in Figure 1; in this condition, the candidate as a Democrat fares worse than all other conditions and the candidate as a Republican fares better than all other pandering conditions.

The simple comparison of means in Figure 1 demonstrates that candidates from both parties would generally fare better by broadcasting an appeal to the middle class rather than broadcasting a group-specific appeal. Of course, the whole point of targeting is that candidates do not have to make such a choice. Instead, they can make broad middle class appeals when their statements will reach a heterogeneous audience and appeal to smaller subgroups when they are able to narrowcast messages to members of the subgroups. Thus, while the analysis of all respondents is instructive, it is only the beginning of the story.
Effect of Targeted Appeals on the Targeted

To determine the extent to which targeted appeals generate more support among their intended audiences than a general appeal, we examine the effects of different appeals among each subgroup. These values are presented in Figure 2. For each subgroup we measure the average level of support when the candidate delivers the targeted appeal, and then we measure the average level of support when the candidate delivers the “middle class” appeal. The figure shows the difference between these means, with a 95% confidence interval around the difference. For example, if group members receiving the group-specific treatment rate the candidate at 60 (out of 100) and the group members receiving the “middle class” treatment rate the candidate at 40, this would appear in Figure 2 as a value of 20. Positive values indicate the group appeal was preferred; negative values indicate that the middle class appeal was preferred. Reactions to appeals from Democratic candidates are shown separately from those coming from Republican candidates.

The findings presented in Figure 2 demonstrate the limited effectiveness of targeted messages to subgroups. The left panel shows that when a Democrat appeals to religious conservatives, unions, or Latinos he performs no better than if he had appealed to these groups simply by offering to work on behalf of the middle class. It may be the case that members of these groups did not view any of these appeals as credible. It is also possible that union members and Latinos assume that all Democrats will work on their behalf, so panders from a Democratic candidate do not provide any new information.

For a Republican candidate, the effects are more nuanced. As with the Democrat, the Republican’s group-based appeal to unions is indistinguishable in effect from his appeal to the middle class. On the other hand, targeted appeals from the Republican do appear to work on Latinos and born-again Christians. When Latinos received a group-based pander from the Republican candidate, their average support for that candidate increased by about 28 points relative to when Latinos received the middle class appeal. Although the small
Figure 2: Support for candidate with targeted message minus support for candidate with “middle class” message, among respondents belonging to targeted group.
number of Hispanics available for comparison is reflected in the large confidence intervals around these means, a difference of means test does indicate that this difference is statistically significant. Republicans also benefited from pandering to “religious conservatives.” Born-again Christians hearing such an appeal became about 20 points more likely to support the candidate compared to born-again Christians who heard an appeal to the middle class. It may be that Latinos and born-again Christians are groups that respond well to Republican targeting because all Republican candidates are not presumed to support these groups, however an appeal to the groups is plausible and might need to be transmitted under the radar. On the other hand, it might be that the Republican appeal to unions and all of the Democratic appeals either provide no useful information to voters above and beyond the candidate’s party or are simply taken as non-credible panders.

**Penalties for Mis-Targeted Appeals**

While technological innovations have made it easier for candidates to identify members of particular groups and send only certain messages to those groups, the technology is far from perfect and there will typically be cases in which citizens who do not belong to particular groups will erroneously receive appeals meant for those groups. Thus, to fully understand whether targeted pandering is effective, we must also explore the potential costs involved in such pandering.

Figure 3 is a parallel analysis to Figure 2 but for respondents who are not in the group that is the subject of the appeal. For example, the upper-left plot indicates that a non-born again Christian receiving an appeal from a Democrat rates the candidate about 40 points lower when the appeal is targeted to born-again Christians rather than the middle class. In contrast to the limited positive effect that group-specific pandering has on in-group members evidenced in Figure 2, here we see consistent and significant penalties for mis-targeting. This is in line with our proposition that mis-targeted messages are, on average,
Figure 3: Support for candidate with targeted message minus support for candidate with “middle class” message, among respondents not belonging to targeted group.

taken more seriously by voters than messages that reach intended audiences.

There is evidently a serious risk for candidates crafting group-based appeals. If enough group-specific messages reach individuals who are not part of the intended group, then a significant backlash could occur. But how high would the error rate have to be to make targeted pandering ineffective? Recall from Figure 2 that in most cases, candidates did not gain a significant benefit from pandering to a particular group. Republicans did gain a large bump from (nearly 20 points) from pandering to born-again Christians, but when the same pander reached a citizen who was not born-again, the candidate was penalized by about 30 points. Thus, to gain a net positive effect from pandering to born-again Christians, a Republican candidate would have to ensure that for every three born-again Christians that
receive the appeal, fewer than 2 non born-agains see it. A similar calculation indicates that for a net gain from targeting Hispanics, a Republican would have to make sure a Latino pander would reach fewer than three non-Hispanics for every two Hispanics reached.

Panders that Polarize

An important consequence of targeting is that it may serve to polarize the electorate. Consider that a general appeal from a candidate may generate moderate feelings for that candidate among most voters. Even party identifiers may feel relatively ambivalent about a candidate from the other party who promises to work on behalf of the middle class. On the other hand, targeted pandering to narrower groups may serve to generate more intense support among members of those groups while also generating intense opposition from those outside of the group. Figure 4 plots the distribution of support for the candidate among born again and non-born again Christians depending on whether they received a middle class or religious appeal.

The top two panels in the figure show the distribution of support for the candidate making the broad appeal. While there is some degree of bi-modality in these plots, it is generally mild and the distribution in support among born again and non-born again Christians is relatively similar. However, when the candidate vowed to work on behalf of religious conservatives, support for that candidate polarized on religious grounds. This is particularly true when the appeal came from a Republican—support for the Republican candidate making the religious appeal was intense among born again Christians, while intense opposition was registered among those who were not born again. Thus, even when a candidate is able to make inroads with a particular group through targeted pandering, that candidate risks generating intense opposition if members of the out-group are made aware of these appeals.

\(^9\)It is worth noting that for voter list firms we are aware of, estimates of which individuals are Hispanic tend to be much more accurate than estimates of religious involvement.
Figure 4: Kernel density plots of support for candidate among born again and non-born again Christians depending on type of appeal
The CCES experiment offers a window into the potential effectiveness of targeting and provides initial answers to the questions we have posed. Are pandering messages preferred by voters to general ones? No. For the general audience of voters, a message indicating a candidate’s preference for any particular group is less effective than a message geared toward the generic middle class. Even for voters whose own groups are singled out, there is a preference for the broad appeal, except in a few cases. Does the effectiveness of the pander depend on the party of the candidate and the issue ownership of the given party? Yes. In the experiment, only Williams the Republican gets any traction on a pander, and he does not do so with unions, the group tested that is most often associated with Democrats. Do mis-targeted voters penalize candidates for claiming to attend to other groups? Yes. Respondents who received the middle class treatment were much more favorable to the candidate than respondents who received a group based appeal for a group with which they are not affiliated.

**Findings from Experiment 2**

Having laid out the general findings from the CCES survey experiment, we now check for robustness and explore some of the mechanisms at play, utilizing the Mechanical Turk sample. In the second experiment, we find the largest effect for a religious appeal coming from a Republican candidate. Born-again Christians hearing the targeted appeal from the Republican were nearly 1.5 points (now on a 9 point scale) more likely to support the candidate making that appeal. However, unlike the CCES experiment, the religious appeal also paid off for the Democratic candidate. Born-again Christians hearing the same targeted appeal from the Democratic candidate were about .9 points more supportive of that candidate than they were under the baseline condition (“constituents” in this experiment, as opposed to “middle class” in the CCES experiment). Similar to the CCES experiment, the other appeals were not associated with an increase in support among the target group. However, there was one
exception to this trend. When the Republican candidate vowed to work hard on behalf of unions, union members became nearly 1.4 points more supportive of that candidate in the second experiment, a result we take to be an anomaly.

The out-group effects were generally in the same direction as those evidenced in the CCES experiment. Candidates making religious appeals were still heavily penalized by subjects who were not born-again Christians: these subjects were about 2 points less likely to vote for a Democrat making such an appeal and 1.7 points less likely when it was the Republican. Other group-based appeals also tended to result in a lower likelihood of voting for that candidate, though we did not have sufficient power for these differences to be statistically significant. We believe that the results from Mechanical Turk were not as strong as those from CCES because we purposely made the baseline category in the MTurk experiment more neutral than in the CCES experiment. Voters generally have positive feelings for the “middle class,” and so there are starker differences between this favorable category and less favorable targeted categories in the CCES. In the MTurk experiment, the baseline of “constituents” is neutral rather than positive, and so it does not evoke particularly favorable sentiments from subjects.  

Exploring How Targeting Works

The survey experiments indicate that pandering can have a strong effect on how citizens evaluate candidates. This is sometimes true for the group being pandered to, but consistently true for those not a part of the group. We embedded in our experiments a few questions to explore whether hearing the pandering message alters respondents’ perceptions of the

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10We find evidence for this claim in our convenience sample. We asked each subject in this sample questions about linked fate. One such question asked respondents how much they think what happens to the middle class affects what happens in their own lives; another asked the same question but substituting “people in your congressional district” for “middle class.” On a seven-point scale ranging “not at all” (coded 1) to “very much” (coded 7), subjects registered an average linked fate of 5.73 with the middle class compared to 5.00 for people in their congressional district. This difference was significant at p<.01.
candidate’s ideology and whether pandering effects were concentrated among people who feel particularly connected to the group that is targeted.

Is Pandering Informative about Candidate Ideology?

One potential reason that pandering appeals affect both in-group and out-group members is that the appeals serve as an informational cue for citizens, providing them with a signal of how the candidate is likely to act if elected. Witnessing a candidate pandering allows voters to update their beliefs about where the candidate stands on various issues. This can be particularly powerful in a low-information environment, where citizens are likely to react strongly to new pieces of information (Mondak (1993)). Thus, a Republican who makes an appeal to the middle class may be perceived as somewhat more moderate than one who panders to religious conservatives. Likewise, a Republican making an appeal to work on behalf of unions might be considered relatively liberal.

To determine what effect the group-based pander has on perceptions of the candidate’s ideology, we asked subjects in our second experiment to place the hypothetical candidate on a seven-point ideological scale after receiving the treatment. The scale ranged from “very liberal” (coded 1) to “very conservative” (coded 7). If the pander is effective because it provides additional information about where the candidate stands ideologically, then we should expect to find that respondents place the candidate in a different position when they receive a different type of appeal.

Figure 5 shows the average placement of the candidate (with 95% confidence intervals) among group members depending on the type of appeal those group members received and the source of the cue. For example, the bottom right panel compares the born-again subjects’ placement of the Democratic candidate when they received the broad appeal with their placement when they received the group-specific appeal. The plot shows that born-again Christian subjects estimated that the candidate was relatively liberal when he made an
appeal to work on behalf of constituents, but they placed him two points more conservative when he vowed to work on behalf of born-again Christians. A similar pattern was evident when born-again Christians evaluated a Republican candidate.

Union members and Latinos also changed their placement of the candidate depending on the type of appeal he made. Specifically, when the candidate appealed to either of these groups, members of the groups estimated that he was more liberal than if he made an appeal only to work on behalf of constituents. Figure 6 indicates that subjects who were not members of one of these three groups reacted similarly. When the candidate made an appeal to unions or Latinos, these subjects estimated that the candidate was more liberal than if he made a broader appeal. Likewise, when the candidate appealed to born-again Christians,
subjects indicated that they thought the candidate was more conservative.

Group-based appeals tend to provide individuals with ideological information about the candidate. However, it is not entirely clear how this information translates into changes in the level of support. In-group members and out-group members both gain politically-relevant information when they hear a targeted pander, but for out-group members hearing the pander translates into more perceptible changes in support than it does for in-group members. In line with the theoretical model of Kartik and McAfee (2007), this may be the result of in-group members sensing the pandering candidate is being disingenuous and therefore not rewarding the candidate with support even if it appears the candidate is playing to the group’s policy interests. Conversely, a mis-targeted voter will assume that the preference
for a particular group is genuine, potentially resulting in a more direct relationship between ideological information and support.

Worth noting in Figures 5 and 6 is the consistent potency of the appeal to the religious right. In the initial results showing the effects of pandering on support and in the results here on the effect of pandering on ideological placement, appeals to religious conservatives have the most consistent and generally the largest effects on in-group and out-group members alike. Compared to other targeting treatments, when the candidate declares that he will work on behalf of religious conservatives or born-again Christians, this message sends a signal that sharply alters voters’ perceptions and their level of support.

Do Group-Based Appeals Resonate With Group Identities?

Even if pandering occasionally works on members of the group being targeted, it is likely the case that it does not work on all members of that group. Simply belonging to a group does not necessarily make one feel a strong identity with that group (Gay and Hochschild (N.d.)) and there is little reason to expect those with weak group identities to respond strongly to group-based appeals. For example, many Latinos in the United States do not feel a particularly strong identity with other Latinos (Rodriguez (2000); Jones-Correa and Leal (1996)). Thus, for these Latinos, a pledge by a candidate to work on behalf of Latinos may be no more persuasive than an appeal to work on behalf of the middle class.

Prior to the treatment in the MTurk experiment, we asked Hispanics, union members, and born-again Christians a question about how much shared fate they felt with their group\textsuperscript{11}. The question asked respondents to place themselves on a seven-point scale ranging from low to high levels of shared fate. We separated those responding with a 5 or higher (high shared fate) from those answering 4 or lower (low shared fate).

\textsuperscript{11}Specifically, the question asked “How much do you think what happens to [group] in this country will affect what happens in your life?” Responses ranged from “not at all” (coded 1) to “very much” (coded 7).
Since the subjects for this analysis are not representative of the American public, we cannot draw inferences about the relative level of shared fate among the groups. However, we can examine whether subjects with higher (or lower) levels of shared fate respond differently to group-based appeals. This is the analysis we present in Figure 7. The figure presents the group’s average likelihood of supporting a candidate depending on whether they received the broad appeal (the empty square) or the targeted pander (darkened circle). We produce one plot for group members with high levels of shared fate (scores of 5 or higher) and a second plot for those with low levels (4 or below).

Overall, the findings conform with our expectations. When group members felt higher levels of shared fate with their group, appeals to that group were more effective. For exam-
ple, born-again Christians who expressed higher levels of shared fate with other born-again Christians were 1.57 points more likely to vote for the candidate who made the group-based appeal relative to the general appeal \((t=3.80, p<.01)\). Union members with high levels of shared fate were 1.25 points more likely to support the candidate making the group-based appeal \((t=2.78, p<.01)\), while the increase in support was 1.17 points for Latinos with high levels of shared fate \((t=1.89, p<.1)\). In contrast, the right-hand panel in Figure 7 shows that when group members felt lower levels of shared fate with their group, they were unmoved by the group-based appeal.

The results from the second experiment help to illuminate potential mechanisms by which targeted group-based appeals can “work.” Finding out that a candidate panders to a particular group alters where a voter will place that candidate on an ideological scale. This does not necessarily imply that voters will shift their support toward candidates with whom they are ideologically aligned, for the act of pandering itself may be a signal of dishonesty. Separately, we have shown that to the extent group-based appeals work, they work by activating support among those who identify most with their group. Pandering is likely to be most successful when it is aimed at groups with higher levels of identity. Given that it is challenging for campaigns to cleanly identify members of these groups at large, it is presumably even more difficult, prior to making an appeal, to identify members of a group who have particularly high levels of linked fate.

**Conclusion**

The study of campaign effects has been notoriously difficult, particularly with regard to analyzing the influence of targeted campaign messages and of persuasive effects (Arceneaux 2010). By utilizing survey experiments, we are able to confront concerns about endogeneity and selection bias in order to gain a better understanding of the effects that targeted messages
have on their intended audiences and on unintended audiences. 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, since they lead 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 and Latinos 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 important to re-emphasize that our study focuses 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 tame compared to the appeals that a targeted voter might be exposed to by a real campaign. Furthermore, the appeal in our experiment was vague and not specifically policy-oriented, which might have also served to mute its effect.

As with all survey and lab experiments, this research gains causal leverage at the expense of external validity. Surely, electoral context and a politician’s established reputation can influence how receptive a voter will be to a targeted pander. Having laid out a model for research on the effects of targeting, it is our hope that future research will create both more elaborate experiments to examine the effects of targeting, as well as utilize observational and field experimental studies, perhaps by partnering with actual campaigns.

Our findings contribute to the 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 generates more support for a candidate among the intended group, the candidate in our experiment always loses support when his appeal is seen by those outside of the group. This pattern underscores the importance of transparency—if candidates’ targeted messages were available for all citizens to see, it is likely that candidates would find it too costly to make promises to narrow groups. Yet, with more precise and accurate data on the electorate, campaigns will increasingly have the ability to do just that without being penalized by other the rest of the electorate.
**Appendix: Description of Experimental Conditions**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Targeted Group</th>
<th>Democratic Candidate</th>
<th>Republican Candidate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Middle Class</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>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.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Religious Conservatives</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unions</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Latinos</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>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.</td>
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