

Title: Social group appeals in party rhetoric: Effects on policy support and polarization

Short title: Social group appeals in party rhetoric

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Abstract:

Can parties and politicians increase support for their policy positions by adding appeals to social groups? Social groups provide simple cues that heuristically help voters to decide whether they support a policy. We argue that the effect of group appeals crucially depends on respondents' group affect and the valence of the group appeal. Among those with a positive attitude towards a group, adding a positive group appeal to a policy statement should increase support for the policy statement, while adding a negative appeal (i.e., against the group) should decrease support. Among those with negative attitudes towards a group, the opposite effects should occur. We test our expectations with two survey experiments¹. Our results indicate that the addition of group appeals substantially influences the evaluations of voters and leads to higher polarization. Social group appeals are useful to political parties, but these rhetorical tools may reinforce attitude polarization and group stereotypes.

Keywords:

social groups, group appeals, group affect, political communication, survey experiments

¹Replication files are available in the JOP Data Archive on Dataverse (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop>). The empirical data has been successfully replicated by the JOP replication analyst. Supplementary material for this article is available in the Online Appendix. The experiment included in the second survey was pre-registered <https://osf.io/ks9xn/>.

Introduction

In a press conference on Christmas Eve 2020, the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson informed the public about the results of negotiations with the European Union on a Brexit Deal. In his 10-minute speech, he praised how the deal would benefit social groups such as (British) farmers, hauliers, manufacturers, “those working in high skilled jobs”, police and border forces, and the fishing communities.² Similarly, when President Barack Obama presented his vision of a health care reform in a joint session of Congress in September 2009, he discussed how a healthcare bill would affect middle-class Americans, the self-employed, small businesses, doctors and nurses, workers, families, and senior citizens.³

Such appeals to specific social groups are not surprising given how important group membership and social identities are in voters’ decision-making processes (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Achen & Bartels, 2016). Opinions and vote choices are, for example, shaped by individuals’ social class (Evans, 2000), race and ethnicity (Jardina, 2021; Barreto & Pedraza, 2009), gender (Hatemi *et al.*, 2012), sexual orientation (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019), and religion (Stegmueller, 2013). Group identification and attitudes towards groups influence opinions on policy issues (Kinder & Winter, 2001; Transue, 2007; Klar, 2013) because cues to social groups serve as heuristics to evaluate policies (Popkin, 1991; Sniderman *et al.*, 1991; Kuklinski *et al.*, 1991). Framing an issue as relevant for a particular group increases the role of citizens’ predispositions toward that group in evaluating policy statements (Nelson & Kinder, 1996).

In this paper, we examine how parties can influence voter perceptions of their policy proposals by linking them with (positive or negative) appeals to particular social groups. In two survey experiments conducted in Germany, we included appeals to a large variety of social groups. Our key expectation is that group affect explains the impact of group appeals on support for policy proposals: the more positively a group is viewed, the more associating a policy with that group generates greater support. Negative appeals should

²<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-statement-on-eu-negotiations-24-december-2020>

³<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/10/us/politics/10obama.text.html>

exhibit the inverse, yet substantively identical patterns. This study's main contribution, therefore, lies in lifting group-specific studies to a more general, abstract level to test how political parties can use positive and negative group appeals to shape political attitudes and opinions. In doing so, we highlight the central role of group affect in moderating reactions to group appeals and provide a wide-ranging empirical test that considers a broad variety of groups within the same research design. By broadening out the study of group appeals, our approach may also help to explain the inconclusive findings of previous studies, some of which show that group appeals lead to positive reactions from in-group members (Holman *et al.*, 2015; Robison *et al.*, 2021), while others find no effect on in-group members but a backlash among out-group members (Hersh & Schaffner, 2013; Ostfeld, 2019). Our precise contributions to the literature are fourfold.

First, we provide a general theoretical framework for understanding the effect of group appeals on policy support. Building on the existing literature on social group attitudes (Brady & Sniderman, 1985; Conover, 1988; Miller *et al.*, 1991; Achen & Bartels, 2016), we expect individual citizens to hold some level of positive or negative affect towards politically relevant groups. Recently, such affective evaluations have taken center stage in research on partisan affective polarization (Iyengar *et al.*, 2019) and opinion-based affective polarization (Hobolt *et al.*, 2021). Here, we consider how positively or negatively voters feel toward specific social groups. While much recent work on the political importance of social groups has focused on the United States (Achen & Bartels, 2016; Mason *et al.*, 2021; Elder & O'Brian, 2022), there is a long tradition of studying social groups in Europe as well, often within the framework of cleavage politics (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Evans & Tilley, 2017; Thau, 2021; Bornschier *et al.*, 2021).

Parties can include appeals to these social groups in their rhetoric, and these appeals will affect voters' support for party policy statements. Group appeals can be positive or negative, depending on whether the policy is described as benefiting or hurting the group (Huber, 2022). The specific combination of the valence of the group appeal and the level of group affect then determines how citizens react to group appeals. So, a positive group appeal will increase support for a policy among those who feel positively toward

the group but decrease it among those who dislike the group. Conversely, a negative group appeal will increase support for a policy among those who dislike the group but decrease it among those who feel positively toward the group. In this paper, we develop this model theoretically and show that it also holds empirically. Accordingly, our study offers an important extension of the current literature as we demonstrate how voters' opinions on policies are influenced by their group attitudes.

Second, we expand the range of groups well beyond those usually considered. Most previous studies on group appeals focus on one specific group, for example, gender, race, or class (see Holman *et al.*, 2015; Ostfeld, 2019; Robison *et al.*, 2021). Yet, it remains unclear whether the findings actually also hold for other social groups. Since democracies are made up of a wide range of groups that people hold varying levels of affect towards, we should aim for a general theory of group appeals. As a result, this study employs a diverse set of groups, ranging from women, immigrants, and foreigners to car drivers, pensioners, and civil servants.

Third, our approach shows that sympathy or hostility toward specific groups leads to strong reactions to group appeals, even when accounting for group membership and identification. Studies of the impact of groups on politics often take group membership and identification as a starting point (Klar, 2013; Achen & Bartels, 2016), with political support depending on what is good for one's in-group. We take a broader view and argue that group affect – positive and negative feelings towards social groups – only partially overlaps with group membership and identification and is the more proximate force shaping reactions to policy appeals. Of course, group affect may often be based on group membership and group identification, but this is not a necessary condition; it is clearly possible to feel positive affect towards out-groups one does not belong to or identify with (e.g., native citizens' attitudes towards refugees or employed people's views of the unemployed) or negative affect towards in-groups (even though this seems less prevalent). We show that group affect is a strong explanation for policy support in the presence of group appeals, even when accounting for simple measures of group membership and identification. This does not mean that group identities are not an

important part of the puzzle, but their impact is likely to be mediated by the resulting levels of group affect.

Finally, one implication of our theoretical framework is that the use of group appeals has a polarizing effect on policy attitudes. The use of group appeals means that respondents develop a more positive or negative stance on the policy, depending on how they feel towards the group. Adding group appeals, therefore, leads to more extreme policy opinions, especially when group affect is more divided. Our empirical analysis broadly confirms this pattern, even though the polarizing effects were modest. Hence, our account helps us understand how policy divides become entrenched, as attitude polarization will be more severe when the associated levels of group affect are also polarized. Policy debates about groups that do not elicit strong positive or negative associations will thus have fewer polarizing consequences than debates revolving around groups about whom citizens have extreme evaluations.

We test our theoretical expectations with two factorial survey experiments fielded in Germany in November 2020 (N=3,150) and between late July and early August 2021 (N=3,224) that enable us to conduct an in-depth analysis of the effect of adding positive and negative group appeals on how policies are evaluated. In the experiments, we provide survey respondents with fictional party statements. We randomize whether respondents receive a policy appeal only or a policy appeal combined with a group appeal and then measure how voters evaluate these messages. In the two studies, we also include additional treatment groups that enable us to exclude alternative explanations (Study I: group appeal only; Study II: policy appeal combined with a value appeal). Our main outcome of interest is how voters' assessments of the statements differ depending on their affect toward the group mentioned.

Our results show how group appeals powerfully shape the way citizens react to party policy statements. If a group appeal refers to a group that people like, their support for the policy increases. However, if people dislike the group mentioned in the group appeal, their support for the policy decreases. The reverse pattern holds for negative group appeals, so when parties argue that a policy is targeted against one group. We

also show that group affect is a far stronger moderator of the effect of group appeals than group membership or identification.

Our findings have implications for understanding political communication and political representation. We provide a general account for why parties use group appeals to foster policy support. Parties could also use group appeals to reach new segments of the voting public – for instance, those who feel more positive about the group than about the party. In addition, parties may use group appeals to discredit the positions espoused by rivals by emphasizing the consequences these policies might have on specific (popular or unpopular) groups. Hence, our results show how two key elements of party communication - policy and group appeals - can work together to shape political support. However, the use of group appeals can also encourage attitude polarization, especially if group affect itself is heterogeneous. Finally, group divides may affect which policies receive public support and which policies parties pursue. This means that the interplay between group and policy appeals may affect substantive representation through political parties.

Policy and group appeals in political rhetoric

We focus on two different types of appeals that parties can make: *policy appeals* and *group appeals* (see also Nteta & Schaffner, 2013; Holman *et al.*, 2015; Thau, 2021). Policy appeals are messages that are based on particular policy issues and positions. Such appeals are central to issue-based models of voting and party competition, such as spatial theory and saliency theory (Downs, 1957; Budge & Farlie, 1983): political parties develop policy platforms in order to attract the largest possible number of voters. In campaigns, parties thus provide information about policy issues so that voters have the opportunity to acquire knowledge of party proposals, both in terms of their position and the salience of a particular policy domain (Nadeau *et al.*, 2008). Ideally, this allows citizens to make informed and meaningful electoral choices and select the party with the programmatic platform and policy priorities that best represent their own interests (Popkin, 1991). Parties will use their limited resources to try to promote messages that they believe

will attract voters. Therefore, campaign communication and advertisements focus on particular issues in order to determine the agenda for the campaign and shape media coverage of it (Valentino *et al.*, 2002). As Green-Pedersen (2019) argues, party politics is increasingly characterized by such issue competition, at least in European democracies.

In contrast, group appeals refer to political messages in which a party presents itself as a supporter or opponent of a social group, be it women, pensioners, families, immigrants, or the unemployed (Thau, 2021). A group appeal therefore clearly refers to the group as the target (though some cues are subtle or implicit; see Mendelberg (2001); Valentino *et al.* (2002)). Political parties and candidates rely extensively on group-based rhetoric and appeals to social groups in their campaign communication. This has been shown for party manifestos, party leader speeches, and other campaign advertisements in the US (Nteta & Schaffner, 2013; Rhodes & Johnson, 2017), but also for the European context (Evans & Tilley, 2017; Thau, 2019; Horn *et al.*, 2021).

One way in which social groups can matter for political behavior is if voters support parties that they see as benefiting their group, or at least a group that they like (Kane *et al.*, 2021). In other words, “the groups the public associates with political parties structure their evaluations of the parties” (Miller *et al.*, 1991, 1147). Group appeals may reinforce such perceptions. This means that parties have an incentive to appeal to social groups because they may directly affect support for parties and candidates or vote choice (Mason *et al.*, 2021). However, empirical studies on the direct effect of group appeals on candidate or party popularity have led to mixed results: Some scholars (for example, Holman *et al.*, 2015; Robison *et al.*, 2021) find that group appeals help to generate support from in-group members and do not lead to negative reactions from out-group members. In contrast, other studies demonstrate that group appeals have limited effects on candidate support among in-group voters but may cause a substantial backlash among out-group voters (Hersh & Schaffner, 2013; Ostfeld, 2019).

How group appeals affect support for policy proposals

While some previous work (Holman *et al.*, 2015; Robison *et al.*, 2021) has treated group and policy appeals as alternatives rather than complementary strategies, we also know that very often group appeals and policy information are combined in the same statement (Horn *et al.*, 2021). Group appeals are frequently used by parties as a justification for their policy stances or as a signal of attention and responsiveness towards the needs and wants of particular groups (Thau, 2019). Yet, our understanding of the effect of group appeals on policy support among the electorate is still very much limited. Existing studies (Kuklinski *et al.*, 1991; Nelson & Kinder, 1996) are exclusively focused on the United States and investigate only a small range of groups and policies. More importantly, they also do not systematically disentangle the effect of combining (positive and negative) group appeals with policy appeals and cannot differentiate between the influence of group membership, group identification, and group affect.

The impact of group appeals is due to the demanding effort required to obtain and analyze the significant amount of information necessary to judge a policy (Popkin, 1991; Sniderman *et al.*, 1991). However, voters often neither care much about politics nor are they particularly eager to invest in this effort to acquire knowledge about party policy stances (Converse, 2006; Zaller, 1992). A long line of research demonstrates that voters lack substantive information about policy and the motivation to engage in elaborate thinking in order to form an opinion (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Achen & Bartels, 2016). Accordingly, Converse (2006) argues that most voters do not hold ideological political belief systems based on consistent issue positions that rest upon a core set of values such as liberalism or conservatism.

However, informational cues linked to policy appeals allow parties to reduce the cost and effort of collecting information. Often, these cues are the party itself, so voters support a policy because “their” party has endorsed it (Dancey & Sheagley, 2012; Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2021). More generally, voters will feel varying levels of affect towards parties (Iyengar *et al.*, 2019; Reiljan, 2020). The extent to which voters respond positively or negatively to a policy proposal will thus depend on their affect towards the party setting

out the proposal. Yet, such party cues may not actually play an important role in campaign strategies because the party label cannot be changed and therefore offers only a very low degree of flexibility.

As a result, parties should try to mobilize support for policies by exploiting other predispositions of voters, such as their identification with certain groups or their attitudes towards different societal groups. Here, existing research shows that identification with a group influences policy support, for example, with regard to immigration (Citrin & Wright, 2009), tax policy (Transue, 2007) and welfare spending (Scheve & Stasavage, 2006). While these studies reveal a significant influence of group identification on policy preferences, they neglect the fact that people may also hold feelings of resentment or sympathy towards in- and out-groups that might strongly affect their political opinions.

Consequently, we differentiate between three distinct but interrelated concepts: objective group membership, subjective group identification, and group affect (Conover, 1988). While group membership refers to the objective allocation of an individual to a particular group based on certain characteristics, group identification relates to an individual's subjective sense of belonging and psychological attachment to a social group (Huddy, 2003). Group identification has been conceptualized within the framework of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981). Social identity theory places the focus on subjective identification with the *in-group* that leads to in-group favoritism and out-group derogation (e.g., racism against blacks).

Instead, the symbolic politics perspective provides a more encompassing view of the political influence of social groups. Following this line of reasoning, social groups function as symbols that trigger positive or negative affective responses (Sears *et al.*, 1980). Hence, it is argued that group attitudes or *group affect* (Conover, 1988, 53) help guide political behavior and opinions. Yet, group identification and group affect may not be perceived as opposing concepts but are closely affiliated with each other. For example, strong identification with an in-group may also lead people to feel more sympathetic towards this group and more hostile towards out-groups that are seen as being in conflict with the interests of the in-group (Conover, 1988, 65). However, the focus on group affect

specifically helps us to understand the influence of positive affect towards out-groups (and negative affect towards in-groups) that has been overlooked by the social identity perspective.

For parties, adding group cues to policy appeals is therefore an attractive strategy because it provides them with an opportunity to effectively communicate political views and increase support for policy positions by building on voters' group affect. This means that strategic parties and politicians have an incentive to include specific societal groups in their campaign messages in order to appeal to certain segments of the electorate. More specifically, campaign messages can inform citizens not only about parties' policy priorities and issue stances but also how these issues are associated with consequences for different societal groups (Nelson & Kinder, 1996). Parties' campaign communication can thus strengthen the connection between social groups, policies, and the party in the minds of voters (Valentino *et al.*, 2002).

Such group cues, if effective, mean that the policy-focused account of how voters acquire and make use of policy information is too optimistic. Instead, feelings and beliefs about social groups can shape how people form opinions about policies (Elder & O'Brian, 2022). Hence, policy support is not just the consequence of how people interpret its impact on their own material interests or how it relates to their general ideological principles (Kinder & Winter, 2001); policy support also results from how parties link this policy to social groups. As Converse (2006, 216) suggests, the average citizen seems to make sense of policy issues "in terms of their expected favorable or unfavorable treatment of different social groupings in the population". This has been demonstrated for group affect towards racial and ethnic groups (Gilens, 1996; Citrin *et al.*, 1997).

Consequently, we assume that voters hold some level of positive or negative *group affect* towards any politically relevant group. When voters are asked to evaluate a party statement on policies, group appeals automatically activate in-group and out-group schemata of voters stored in their memory and trigger affective reactions that are attached to the group schema (Conover (1988, 60); see also Brader *et al.* (2008)). These attitudes towards groups should be more easily accessible compared to complex information on

“hard issues” (Carmines & Stimson, 1980). Therefore, group appeals function as a “likability heuristic” for voters to decide whether they are in favor or against a policy based on the groups they (dis-)like (Brady & Sniderman, 1985). Perceptions of “deservingness” or fairness of treatment might also play an important role and determine sympathy or hostility for specific groups (Conover, 1988). This is also reflected by the fact that support for social welfare programs crucially depends on the program recipients (Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

Our argument is therefore that the addition of group appeals to a policy statement influences voters’ evaluation of the policy depending on their group affect. In this case, voters use group appeals as heuristics to determine whether they are opposed to or in favor of a party’s policy proposal, based on whether they like or dislike the targeted group. Consequently, people with positive attitudes toward the targeted group should evaluate the policy more positively than without the addition of a group appeal. However, for parties, the use of group appeals is not without risks. Citizens with negative attitudes towards a group will react negatively to positive group appeals. This means that while the addition of group appeals will increase support for parties’ policy proposals among some voters, it will also lead to a backlash among people who hold strong negative attitudes towards the targeted group. Each group appeal therefore presents a trade-off to parties, especially if popular affect towards these groups is polarized. The greater the polarization in group affect, the more the inclusion of group appeals will have a polarizing effect on policy evaluation.

In sum, we expect the effect of adding positive group appeals on the evaluation of policy appeals to be dependent on group affect. Accordingly, we formulate two hypotheses concerning the influence of positive group appeals on voters’ evaluations of party policy statements:

Hypothesis 1.1: *Among people with positive group affect, adding positive group appeals has a positive effect on the evaluation of policy appeals.*

Hypothesis 1.2: *Among people with negative group affect, adding positive group appeals has a negative effect on the evaluation of policy appeals.*

So far, we have assumed that group appeals are positive, with parties arguing, for instance, that policies will be good for certain groups, such as women, the working class, or pensioners. However, parties can also add negative group appeals to their policy messages. For example, they may say that certain unloved groups - such as career politicians, the rich, or criminals - have been provided with too many advantages by the system. The effects of adding negative group appeals should be the mirror image of those for adding positive group appeals. When negative group appeals are used in combination with a policy appeal, those who dislike the group will show increased support for the policy statement. In contrast, support for the message will be lower for those who like the group. Again, we expect that the effect of negative group appeals on the evaluation of policy appeals is dependent on group affect.

Hypothesis 2.1: *Among people with positive group affect, adding negative group appeals has a negative effect on the evaluation of policy appeals.*

Hypothesis 2.2: *Among people with negative group affect, adding negative group appeals has a positive effect on the evaluation of policy appeals.*

Research Design

We test our theoretical expectations using two survey experiments fielded in Germany. In both studies, respondents were surveyed online by means of a Computer-Assisted Web Interview (CAWI) conducted by Respondi, a large German provider of online access panels. Participants were selected based on a quota sample representative of the German voting-age population between 18 and 69.⁴ The fieldwork for the first study took place in November 2020 (N=3,150), that for the follow-up survey took place between late July and early August 2021 (N=3,224).

The basic setup in both studies is similar: respondents are shown short hypothetical party statements, which they are asked to evaluate, and these statements vary in the types

⁴We used quotas based on age, gender, and education in Study I, and quotas based on age, gender, education, and region (*Bundesland*) in Study II.

of appeals they contain. For each statement, participants were thus randomly assigned to different treatment conditions. In the first condition, respondents only received a policy appeal. In the second condition, we added a group appeal to the policy statement. For example, a party could justify its position against the ban on blood donations for homosexual men (policy statement) using a positive group appeal towards the LGBTIQ community:

“We stand by the LGBTIQ community and want to strengthen the social acceptance of gays and lesbians. To this end, the Transfusion Act must be amended, and the ban on potential blood donors based on their sexual orientation must be lifted.”

We selected a broad range of social groups that differ with regard to group size and popularity among the general public, including demographic, gender, economic and professional, political, regional, societal, and cultural groups. In this context, it was especially important to us to use combinations of group and policy appeals that came as close as possible to what voters would actually encounter in real-world campaigns. We, therefore, rely on group-policy appeals that feature prominently in the campaign material of German parties. Our choice of social groups and policies is based on a qualitative analysis of party manifestos for the 2017 and 2021 elections. To substantiate the selection of social groups, we also conducted a quantitative content analysis of the 2021 party manifestos after fielding the experiments (see Appendix B). The descriptive findings clearly show that we have covered the most relevant groups for this election campaign in our experiments.

In particular, we aimed for a balanced selection of groups that could be used by right-wing parties (e.g., negative references to refugees), left-wing parties (e.g., negative appeals against rich people), or parties on either side of the political spectrum (e.g., positive appeals towards women). To test the effect of positive and negative group appeals, we included both types of appeals. In Study I, different groups are the subject of positive and negative appeals, while Study II also includes positive and negative appeals towards the same groups. The complete stimulus material is listed in Appendix B.

The vignettes in condition 2 (with group appeals) are longer than those in condition

Table 1: Experimental conditions

	Condition 1	Condition 2	Condition 3
Study I	Policy Appeal	Group + Policy Appeal	Group Appeal
	The Transfusion Act must be amended and the ban on potential blood donors based on their sexual orientation must be lifted.	We stand by the LGBTIQ community and want to strengthen the social acceptance of gays and lesbians. To this end, the Transfusion Act must be amended and the ban on potential blood donors based on their sexual orientation must be lifted.	We stand by the LGBTIQ community and want to strengthen the social acceptance of gays and lesbians.
Study II	Policy Appeal	Group + Policy Appeal	Value Appeal + Policy Appeal
	The Transfusion Act must be amended and the ban on potential blood donors based on their sexual orientation must be lifted.	We stand by the LGBTIQ community and want to strengthen the social acceptance of gays and lesbians. To this end, the Transfusion Act must be amended and the ban on potential blood donors based on their sexual orientation must be lifted.	We are committed to social diversity and against discrimination. To this end, the Transfusion Act must be amended and the ban on potential blood donors based on their sexual orientation must be lifted.

1 (without group appeals). Statement length might affect how respondents read and perceive the information given in the text. This is why we added a third condition in both studies. In the first study, we used the group appeal without the policy appeal as a reference category. This allows us to compare “pure” policy appeals (condition 1) with “pure” group appeals (condition 3). In the second study, we added a value-based justification (instead of a group appeal) to the policy appeal in the third condition. For example, instead of a group appeal (“We stand by the LGBTIQ community and want to strengthen the social acceptance of gays and lesbians.”), we added a statement on the party’s values and principles (“We are committed to social diversity and against discrimination.”). These statements are roughly as long as those in condition 2 and serve as a placebo test: if group appeals indeed work as an informational cue or likability heuristic for respondents, the results should be different from the comparison of policy appeals and the combination of group and policy appeals.

An additional difference between the two studies is the use of specific party labels. In the first study, we gave no indication about the specific party sending the message,⁵

⁵The exact question wording was: “In the following, we show you several statements that different parties might take in the 2021 federal election. Please read them carefully and answer how much you like them.”

as the aim was to examine the effect of different types of appeals when there is only minimal information on the parties issuing these statements. However, as real-world policy appeals always come with a party attached, this adversely affects the external validity of our findings in Study I. So, it is important to test whether results differ once party cues are present. To do so, we added party labels to the vignettes in Study II. Each appeal was preceded by the following sentence: “Imagine that [the CDU-CSU/ the SPD/ the FDP/ the Green Party/ the Left Party/ the AfD] would make the following statement:”.

The assignment of the party label (for one of the six parliamentary parties) was varied at random. This naturally led to some, albeit very few, combinations that may have been surprising or even implausible to some respondents, for instance, when the radical right party supports the rights of refugees. However, our reading of German manifestos threw up several unexpected group appeals (for example, the radical-right AfD indeed includes positive group appeals towards ‘well-integrated’ Muslims). Moreover, we do not find strong patterns of conditional reactions depending on party cue, so respondents appeared to accept statements equally, irrespective of their potential realism. For a discussion of the empirical results conditional on party cues, see the additional analyses section below as well as Appendix F.

Immediately after being presented with each of the randomized vignettes, respondents were asked to assess the statement on a 0-10 like-dislike scale.⁶ This measure of statement evaluation serves as our dependent variable. Respondents evaluated the statements in a random order, and treatment conditions were selected at random for each statement.

To test for heterogeneous responses based on group affect, we asked respondents to indicate their sympathy for social groups on 0-10 like-dislike scales (the results are shown in Appendix C).⁷ We also asked respondents in our first study to state which groups they belong to and identify with in order to disentangle the effects of group affect, group

⁶“On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means ‘dislike very much’ and 10 indicates ‘like very much’, how would you rate this political position?”

⁷Social desirability could mean that respondents are unwilling to state that they dislike certain groups; to the extent that this is the case, this should reduce our ability to find

membership, and group identification.⁸ We do so in part because our heterogeneous treatment effects by group affect are observational (Kam & Trussler, 2017), so controlling for other, related ways in which individuals relate to groups improves confidence in the causal claims we make. See Appendix F for details. All group-related questions were asked prior to the experiment. After giving their informed consent, participants answered a series of questions on demographic attributes (age, gender, education), political attitudes (e.g., partisanship, political ideology), group membership, and group identification. In Study II, we also asked respondents to place all six parties on 0-10 like-dislike scales prior to the experiment. The choice of whether to ask about identification and other group-related measures before or after the treatment is far from trivial: placement before the treatment potentially primes respondents, while placement after the treatment runs the risk of post-treatment bias (Klar *et al.*, 2020). We opted to ask all identity questions prior to the experiment and aimed to reduce priming respondents’ group attitudes by using other, unrelated experiments as a “buffer” before showing respondents the actual stimulus material. In addition, it is likely that the large number of group-related measures cancel each other out, with no prime remaining strong; indeed, the null results for identity-related measures (see below) indicate that pre-treatment priming is not a strong concern.

After completing the survey, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation. Full question wordings, basic summary statistics and the unmoderated treatment effects for both studies are provided in Appendices A and C.⁹

experimental effects of group appeals conditional on group affect.

⁸Due to limitations of survey length, our empirical measures of membership and identification were brief. An overview of the linkage between group membership and identification is provided in Appendix C.

⁹Our focus in this paper is on how the effect of adding a group appeal varies based on group sympathy. While the unmoderated treatment effects are not relevant for our hypotheses, we visualize them for the sake of completeness and transparency.

Model specification

We use linear regression models to test how respondents' like-dislike of policy statements changes in combination with group appeals. Our key comparison of interest in both studies is thus between the group-policy appeal combination and a purely policy-based appeal, so between the first and the second condition. As each respondent evaluated several statements, we stack our data to create a dataset with multiple observations per respondent. To account for this data structure, we run regression analyses with clustered standard errors (by respondent) and include fixed effects for individual respondents and statements.

The first key covariate is a categorical variable indicating whether the respondent assessed the group appeal, the policy appeal, the combined group-policy appeal (Study I), or the combined value-policy appeal (Study II). We test whether the effect of this variable is conditional on group affect. We expect a positive interaction for positive group appeals (i.e., adding a positive group appeal should lead to a more positive evaluation if respondents like the respective group) and a negative interaction for negative group appeals (adding a negative group appeal should lead to a more negative evaluation if respondents like the group).

For regressions based on data from Study II (with party cues), we also include a measure for party affect (0-10 like-dislike score of the relevant party) and its interaction with the categorical treatment variable. In general, one might expect a positive correlation between party affect and the evaluation of policy statements. While we do not expect large differences of the party affect across the conditions, adding the interactions makes the model more flexible and the main effects more comparable to those of group affect. To account for the remaining variation in the evaluation of party statements, we also include party fixed effects.

Main results

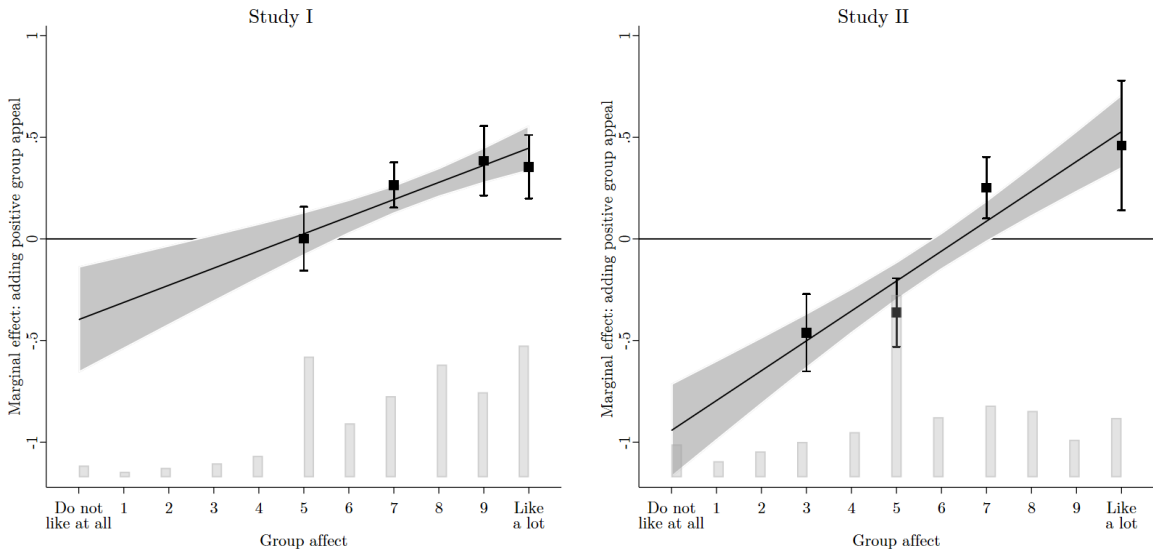
For positive group appeals, we expect a positive effect on the evaluation of policy appeals for people who like the respective social group (H1.1) and a negative effect for people who

dislike the group (H1.2). To test these expectations, we examine heterogeneous treatment effects (i.e., of adding a group appeal to a policy statement) conditional on group affect. The full regression models for both studies are shown in Appendix E (Tables E.1 and E.2). Figure 1 shows the corresponding marginal effects.

There is clear, consistent evidence from both studies that adding positive group appeals improves the evaluation of a policy statement among respondents who like the social group (H1.1). For example, for respondents who like the relevant group a lot (10), adding a group appeal to a policy significantly increases the evaluation of the statement by about 0.45 (Study I) and 0.53 points (Study II) on the 0-10 like-dislike scale. In turn, adding positive group appeals to policy statements has a negative effect among respondents who dislike the group (H1.2). For respondents who strongly dislike the group (0), adding a (positive) appeal to that group to a policy statement decreases the evaluation of the statement by about 0.4 (Study I) and 0.94 points (Study II) on the 0-10 like-dislike scale. Compared to the standard deviation (2.6 in Study I; 3.2 in Study II), this swing by 1 to 1.5 points on the 0-10 like-dislike scale is also substantively important.

Following Hainmueller *et al.* (2019), we also test the linearity assumption that is implicit in regression models with continuous moderating variables. In the binning approach, the moderating variable is split into groups ('bins') representing different percentiles (here: quartiles) of its distribution. The dummy variables for the bins are then interacted with the treatment variable. This allows us to test whether the marginal effect of the treatment across quartiles (black dots) indeed follows a linear pattern. Overall, this is the case in both studies, but in Study I (left panel in Figure 1), we cannot safely argue that adding a group appeal indeed has a negative effect among those with low group affect. This is most likely due to the skewed distribution of the moderating variable, as shown in the histogram underlying Figure 1: most respondents provide high ratings for the social groups with positive group appeals, and with few observations below 5, we cannot safely reject the null hypothesis. In Study II, we also included appeals to groups with a more diverse group affect. The distribution of group affect is more symmetrical than in Study I (as seen in the histogram), and the estimates from the binning model

Fig. 1: Marginal effect of adding positive group appeals on the evaluation of policy appeals



Notes: Results based on Model 2 in Table E.1 (left panel) and Model 2 in Table E.2 (right panel). Bars indicate the distribution of the moderating variable (group affect). To test the linearity of the interaction effect, we use the binning method (Hainmueller *et al.*, 2019) to split the moderating variable (group affect) into quartiles. The marginal effects for the median value within each quartile (black dots) are shown along with 95% confidence intervals.

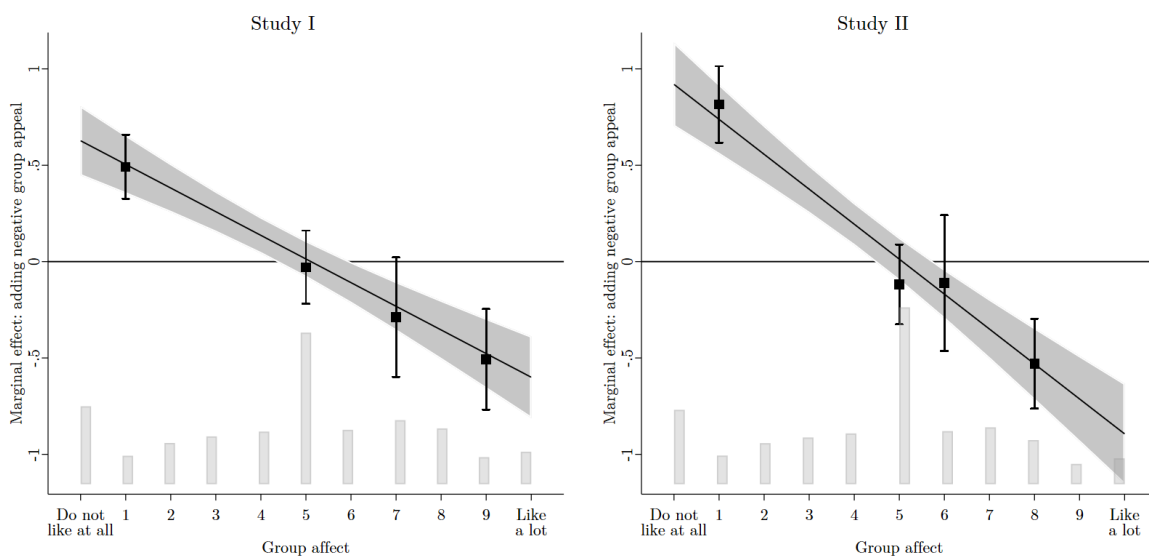
indicate a statistically significant and substantively relevant negative effect.

Turning to negative group appeals, we expect the policy appeals to be evaluated more negatively for people who like the respective social group (H2.1) and more positively for people who dislike the group (H2.2). Figure 2 displays the marginal effects of adding negative group appeals to (negative) policy statements, conditional on group affect. The corresponding regression models are shown in Appendix E (Tables E.3 and E.4).

We find clear evidence for a conditional effect of adding group appeals to policy statements. Among respondents who strongly like the social group (10), adding a negative group appeal decreases support for the issue appeal (H2.1) by 0.60 (Study I) and 0.89 points (Study II) on the 0-10 scale. In turn, adding a negative group appeal increases support for policy messages for respondents who dislike the social group (H2.2) by 0.63 (Study I) and 0.92 points (Study II). As for positive appeals, the swing of up to 1.2 (Study I) and 1.8 points (Study II) is also substantively meaningful compared to the standard deviation in the evaluation of negative statements (3.2 in Study I; 3.3 in Study II).

It is important to keep in mind that our hypotheses focus on the conditional effect of group affect on the evaluation of policy statements.¹⁰ So, what we show is that parties can increase support for their policy positions among the groups they are targeting by explicitly addressing these groups. However, there are potential backlash effects among voters who (dis-)like the group.

Fig. 2: Marginal effect of adding negative group appeals on the evaluation of policy appeals



Notes: Results based on Model 2 in Table E.3 (left panel) and Model 2 in Table E.4 (right panel). To test the linearity of the interaction effect, we use the binning method (Hainmueller *et al.*, 2019) to split the moderating variable (group affect) into quartiles. The marginal effects for the median value within each quartile (black dots) are shown along with 95% confidence intervals.

One potential concern relates to the text length of the vignettes: adding a group appeal to a policy appeal makes the statement longer and adds a justification for why the party has taken a specific stance on an issue. Respondents might be more likely

¹⁰Interestingly, the results from Study I also indicate that the conditional effect of group affect on the evaluation of a pure group appeal (without policy) is stronger than on the combined policy-group appeal (see Tables E.1 and E.3). Our interpretation of this finding is that social group appeals are a very effective campaign strategy that may help parties to bolster their electoral fortunes by remaining ambiguous about their policy positions.

to use group cues on longer statements with justifications, irrespective of whether the statement explicitly refers to a social group or not. To test whether this is the case, we draw on the third experimental condition in Study II. In this treatment group, we added a value appeal to a policy appeal. These value appeals also increase text length and add a justification for the policy position (as group appeals do), but they do not explicitly refer to social groups. We use this treatment group as a placebo test. Specifically, we study whether adding a value appeal to a policy appeal has the same (conditional) effect as adding a group appeal. The marginal effect plots are shown in Appendix E. The placebo test provides no evidence that adding a value appeal has a similar effect as adding a group appeal. Hence, it is not the justification or text length but the explicit reference to social groups that triggers the group affect for the statement evaluation.

Additional analyses

We also conducted a series of exploratory analyses to study the observable implications of our analysis and to test the robustness of our findings in different model specifications.

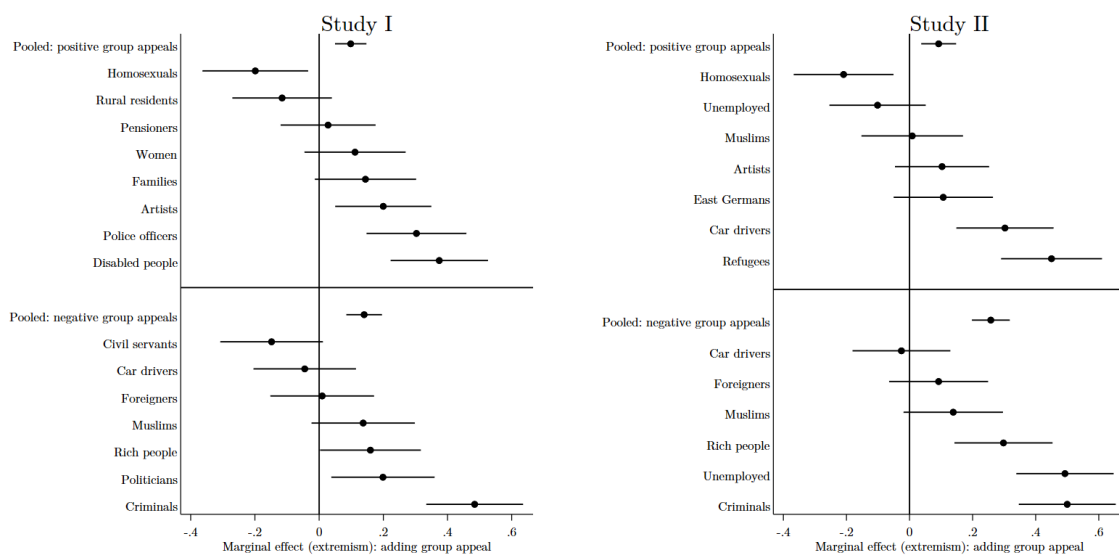
Polarizing effects of group appeals

The addition of group appeals to policy statements leads to contrasting reactions among respondents depending on their affect towards the group mentioned. One implication of this finding is that the addition of group appeals fosters attitude polarization: the evaluations of respondents exposed to a group-policy appeal should be more extreme than those of respondents who evaluate policy statements. To show this effect, we reanalysed our data, using attitude extremity as our outcome variable. Specifically, we measure the extremity of the evaluation using the Euclidean distance of the respondents' evaluation from the scale midpoint (5).

Figure 3 shows the average marginal effect of adding group to policy appeals on the extremity of respondents' evaluation of a statement. We show effects for pooled models (with all positive and negative appeals, respectively) and for individual issues. We can indeed see that polarization is greater when group appeals are added to policy statements. We find positive and significant effects in the pooled models and for most

individual issues as well. The substantial magnitude of these effects, however, is relatively small. In the pooled models, the marginal effects of adding a group appeal (0.1 to 0.3) are relatively small compared to the standard deviation in the dependent variable (1.9 in both studies). Finally, not all effects are statistically significant, and for some social groups (e.g., homosexuals in Study I), adding a group appeal even leads to less polarized evaluations. Several factors might account for these differences. For example, null effects might occur if policy statements (e.g., increasing pensions) are very popular, so that adding positive group appeals to these statements has little or no effect (i.e., a ceiling effect). Alternatively, adding a group appeal might matter most for groups where respondents in general have strong positive (e.g., disabled people) or negative (e.g., criminals) affect. Yet, given the limited set of issue statements and groups, it is challenging to distinguish and test such potential explanations.

Fig. 3: Adding group appeals and polarization



Notes: Results based on models in Tables F.1 and F.3 (left panel) and Tables F.2 and F.4 (right panel). Dependent variable: Extremity of the evaluation of statements. The marginal effects from this model (black dots) are shown along with 95% confidence intervals.

Group membership and identification

We ran a series of tests to check the robustness of our findings. First, our measure of group affect may actually indicate in-group favourability. Respondents who are members

of a particular group, and in particular those who identify with that group, may be more likely to feel positive affect towards it. We can account for these potential confounders based on the data collected in the first study. Before the actual experiment, we asked respondents whether they were members of the respective group (0/1). The question wording differs depending on the group. For example, we asked respondents how often they use their car (to identify car drivers) or whether they are civil servants.¹¹ To measure group identification, we showed respondents a list of social groups and asked them to indicate those they subjectively felt they belonged to (0/1). We re-ran the regression models from Study I, including covariates for group membership and group identification (Kam & Trussler, 2017) and interactions of these variables with the (randomly assigned) statements respondents assessed.

Accounting for group membership and group identification does not change our main conclusions. As in our main analyses, adding positive (negative) group appeals leads to more (less) support for policy statements if respondents like the social group. In contrast, we find no similar (conditional) effect for group membership and group identification: adding group appeals to policy statements has roughly the same effect irrespective of the respondents' objective membership or subjective feeling of belonging to that group.

Heterogeneity by issues and parties

We also re-ran the models for individual issues to complement the pooled models for positive and negative appeals. The results are shown in Appendix F. We expect positive effects for positive group appeals and negative marginal effects for negative group appeals. For positive group appeals, all marginal effects of group affect have the expected (positive) sign, with half of these also statistically significant. For the negative group appeals, 7 out of 13 groups show the expected negative and statistically significant effect.

There are different explanatory factors for why effects differ across issues and groups. In Study I, the differences for positive appeals are likely to be due to ceiling effects and a lack of variation in group affect. Most of the groups included in the first study were very popular (e.g., women, families, and disabled people), and the limited variation in

¹¹The exact question wording can be found in Appendix A.

group affect constrains the potential to observe significant differences across conditions. In the second study, we selected positive group statements for social groups that were on average less popular (see also the distribution of sympathy scores in Figure 1). Here, we find statistically significant interaction effects for six of the eight groups.

Other possible explanations for the variation in effect sizes across issues and groups might be related to the research design, such as the strength of the treatment or the match between group and policy. In addition, differences may also be due to the types of policy statements (position vs. valence), the salience of different issues, and whether they concern a redistribution of resources or not. However, our experiment does not provide strong leverage to disentangle these factors.

Finally, we test whether our findings differ across parties. Some parties may be more successful in linking themselves and their policy stances to specific groups than others. For example, voters may perceive some statements to be more credible because of the party's long-standing commitment to an issue or group (Stubager & Slothuus, 2013), as campaign advertising has been shown to be most effective when political parties rely on messages that are congruent with their reputation and traditional strengths (Iyengar & Valentino, 2000).

To test whether party cues affect how respondents react to the addition of group appeals, we re-ran all models from Study II separately for the six parties. The effects are shown in Appendix F. We find no strong evidence that party cues affect how group appeals affect statement evaluation for individual issues. Despite minor differences for a few issues (e.g., negative appeals about Muslims and the far-right AfD), the marginal effects are almost identical across party cues. Thus, we conclude that party cues do not interfere with how group cues affect support for policy statements.¹²

¹²The interference between party and group cues might be stronger in settings (experiments) where the party cue is more powerful. In our experiment (Study II), we only randomized the party label in the text of the vignette. Results might change if party cues are even more explicit.

Open-ended survey responses

We argued above that group appeals help voters decide what social groups are (positively or negatively) affected by the policy. We can use data from Study II to test this causal mechanism: we asked respondents post-treatment in an open question which social groups would be particularly affected by the policy proposed in the statement. We then went through the responses to identify reasonable answers (i.e., specific social groups). In contrast, we disregarded answers where respondents identified no particular group (e.g., ‘all people’), had no opinion (e.g., ‘don’t know’), mentioned no specific social group (e.g., ‘parasites’), or expressed an opinion on the policy (e.g., ‘I like the idea’).

We indeed find that the share of responses with reasonable social groups increases when adding a group to a policy appeal (detailed results are shown in Appendix F). On average, adding a group appeal to a policy appeal makes it more likely that respondents link the statement to a particular social group (+9.2 percentage points). In turn, adding a value appeal to a policy appeal has no similar effect.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown how appeals to social groups affect voters’ support for party policy statements. Relying on a likability heuristic based on their group attitudes relaxes the demands put on citizens when evaluating statements on policy positions. We show that citizens tend to use easily accessible information and apply simple heuristics when these are offered by political parties. Voters who hold positive attitudes towards a particular group will evaluate a statement more favourably if a positive group appeal is present. In contrast, voters who hold negative attitudes towards the group will more negatively evaluate a statement if a positive group appeal is added to a policy appeal. The opposite patterns are present for negative group appeals. As a result, opinions overall become more extreme when group appeals are added to policy appeals, especially when people have diverse (more polarized) affect towards the social groups. Accordingly, our study offers an important extension of the current literature as we illustrate how voters react to party policy statements and when they rely on group attitudes to form an opinion

about party policy positions.

Our approach, which relies on group affect as compared to group membership or identification, helps to explain contradictory results in existing research. These studies show that sometimes positive in-group appeals lead to a backlash among mistargeted out-group voters (Hersh & Schaffner, 2013; Ostfeld, 2019), while other times they generate support from in-group members without leading to negative reactions from out-group members (Holman *et al.*, 2015; Robison *et al.*, 2021). By shifting focus from group membership and identification, we propose an explanation for such patterns. We demonstrate that voters' reactions to (positive or negative) group appeals do not primarily depend on objective group membership or subjective identification with certain groups, but on whether they hold positive or negative attitudes towards the targeted groups. Group membership and identification are clearly essential phenomena for understanding political dynamics, but we show that part of their impact may be mediated by the patterns of group affect they help to generate. As noted above, our empirical measures of membership and identification were brief due to the need to include measures for a wide range of groups, so we are limited in the extent to which we can provide a competitive assessment of membership, identification, and affect as determinants of policy approval. There is clearly a need for additional work that strives to disentangle these aspects – and their distinct or interrelated impacts – using detailed measurement approaches.

These findings also have important implications for issue-based polarization, as we show that group appeals can deepen policy disagreements among the public. Parties may use group appeals strategically in their campaign rhetoric to generate support for their positions, but these appeals may also lead to growing attitude polarization, especially if attitudes towards the group are divided among the public. In our study, the polarizing effects were modest but clearly discernible; future research should examine these effects more closely.

More generally, the use of group appeals may serve to solidify and strengthen stereotypical images of politically marginalized groups. Exploiting and thereby fostering strong group attitudes might therefore increase societal fragmentation and promote inter-group

antipathy. Thus, even though the use of negative appeals against particular groups may help individual parties and their representatives increase support for their policy positions, the potential adverse effects of group-based campaigning also need to be taken into account.

Moreover, our findings also speak to research on political communication and party campaign strategies. Parties regularly make direct appeals to social groups in their communication during election campaigns (Thau, 2019). We complement this research by showing that the use of such group-based appeals in party rhetoric does in fact influence voters' processing of campaign messages, depending on their group attitudes. Thus, our results suggest that adding group cues to policy appeals represents an attractive strategy for strategic parties and politicians aiming to generate and increase support from certain segments of the electorate. This might be especially true for party communication on social media, which allows parties to specifically (micro-)target citizens with a positive or negative affect towards particular groups with a combination of policy proposals and appeals to different groups.

Finally, the question of how to best inform and persuade different groups of voters is of particular importance to the functioning of democracy because it might crucially affect substantive representation and party responsiveness to voter preferences and priorities. We show that group divides among the electorate may affect which policies parties promote and which proposals receive public support. Our findings also imply that issue voting and voting based on group attitudes are not as separate as they seem. For example, voting based on support for a party's policy program is no sufficient evidence for "rational" voters, as this support might actually result from group cues. As group appeals influence voters' evaluations of party policy statements, the interaction between these strategies may crucially affect substantive representation through political parties.

There are various ways to extend this research agenda in future work. First, our research suggests that parties could use group appeals to influence how their competitors are viewed. Parties may use group appeals as a special form of negative campaigning by attacking their political opponents not only based on their policy proposals but also

based on their impact on particular groups. By emphasizing the (positive or negative) consequences of their proposals for specific groups, parties can discredit a rival party. For example, the British Labour Party claimed that “Labour has a proud history of standing shoulder to shoulder with LGBT+ people. We abolished Section 28, equalised the age of consent, created civil partnerships, and only with Labour votes could equal marriage become law. [...] The Conservatives have been slow to understand the scale of abuse and discrimination LGBT+ people continue to face in our society.” (Labour 2019: 69). Thus, voters may judge parties’ policy proposals based on their impacts on certain groups even if the party itself does not use appeals to those groups in its own communication with voters. Since party labels are fixed, linking parties and their policies to disliked groups may be an effective way to pursue negative campaigning. This suggests a significant potential of group appeals in political communication. Scholarly attention to group appeals is therefore of crucial importance for our broader understanding of electoral competition, as they may substantially influence parties’ electoral success.

Second, future work might also aim to explain the variation of group appeal effects across issues and social groups. While we find general support for our expectation that group appeals affect the support of policy statements, there is also interesting variation across issues and social groups (see Appendix F). Perhaps group appeals have a larger impact when group affect in the electorate is predominantly positive or negative. Group appeals may also work better on policy issues where respondents have no strong prior policy attitudes. The salience of issues as well as the policy content of statements may also affect treatment strength. It is also essential that future work use tools such as identity or affect priming to study how experimentally-induced group affect moderates reactions to group appeals. Our study is based on observed group affect and responses to appeals, while controlling for identification and membership but researchers should pursue ways of randomizing group affect as well. Similarly, future work should distinguish between affect towards social groups, partisan groups, and opinion-based groups (Iyengar *et al.*, 2019; Hobolt *et al.*, 2021) in order to arrive at a broader understanding of the role of group affect in opinion formation. Overall, we need better theoretical groundwork and

more data to fully understand under what conditions group appeals are most effective.

Third, future work may also look at how different combinations of group appeals affect voters' perceptions of policy statements. For example, portraying women as mothers by emphasizing their role within the family or referring to women as a particularly vulnerable subset of pensioners in combination with a policy proposal might have different effects on voters' opinions. Radical right parties often not only link policy appeals to a particular group (e.g., foreigners) but also try to combine the statement with another social group (e.g., criminals). Moreover, parties may try to explicitly play particular groups against each other by portraying one group (e.g., cyclists) as a threat to the interests of another group (e.g., car drivers). With this strategy, parties might be able to reinforce the persuasive power of group appeals in generating support for their policy proposals.

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