# Group appeals

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While social groups have long played a major role in the study of political behavior, research on political communication has only recently taken a stronger interest in group references, their mobilization by political actors, and their effects on voters. This entry reviews the current literature on group appeals, highlighting conceptual debates and distinguishing between studies that use group appeals as an independent variable to explain voter behavior and research that aims to explain the use of group appeals by political actors. The entry concludes by emphasizing new avenues for research, including conceptual clarifications and innovations potentially inspired by the party competition literature, a stronger focus on the interaction between group and policy appeals, and methodological advances.

Social groups; social identity; voter behavior; party competition; election campaigns

In this entry, we examine the growing body of literature on group appeals. We shed light on the ongoing discussions at a conceptual level and discuss the current state of the art in the field, differentiating between studies that treat group appeals as an explanatory for voting behavior and research that investigates the use of group appeals by political actors. We also highlight emerging paths for future research, such as refining concepts and drawing inspiration from the party competition literature, the exploration of the interplay between group and policy appeals and advancing research methodologies.

Numerous works demonstrate that linkages to particular social groups have a significant impact on voters' attitudes, opinions, and electoral choices (Achen & Bartels, 2016; Campbell et al., 1960). This not only influences their preferences for political parties and candidates but also their opinions on specific policy measures. A major part of the literature on group-based differences in public opinion and political behavior is based on the concept of group membership. In this context, socio-demographic characteristics including social status, ethnicity, and religious affiliation are used to examine differences in voting behavior among members of these groups (see, for example, Campbell et al., 1960). Other studies emphasize the importance of social identities in explaining party and policy support (Achen & Bartels, 2016), as well as the role of group attitudes as heuristics for understanding politics even for those citizens who do not belong to or identify with the group (Wlezien & Miller, 1997).

Moreover, the idea that parties themselves mobilize social divides by reaching out to various segments of the electorate has a long tradition in the literature on political parties and received a great deal of scholarly attention, particularly with regard to social class. For example, in their seminal study, Przeworski and Sprague (1986) already make the case that the importance of social cleavages as a determinant of voting behavior is a consequence of strategies pursued by political parties. Recent studies have looked more closely at the active role that parties play in mobilizing social divisions based on class and religion. Specifically, the "political choice" approach suggests that the political choice parties offer to voters can help to explain the importance of different cleavages (Evans & de Graaf, 2013). Accordingly, the electoral relevance of cleavages depends on the extent to which parties differ in their policy positions on relevant political conflict issues, including the left-right, economic, and cultural dimension.

Thus far, there has been relatively little scholarly attention paid to the question of how parties employ group-based communications to shape their electoral fortunes. It is surprising that this aspect of political communication was largely ignored, given that political parties and candidates frequently use group-focused rhetoric and appeals to social groups in their communication with voters: for example, Social Democrats appeal to 'workers', Christian Democrats address 'families', Green parties pander to the 'youth', and radical right parties warn against 'foreigners'. More recent studies have demonstrated the importance of group appeals across different countries and for various communication channels such as party manifestos, party leaders' speeches, and other campaign advertisements (Dolinsky, 2022; Horn et al., 2021; Rhodes & Johnson, 2017; Stuckelberger, 2019; Thau, 2019).

While a growing literature around the concept of group appeals has only developed very recently, some previous and parallel developments should be acknowledged. First, Nelson and Kinder (1996) already emphasized the importance of group frames, showing that the impact of group attitudes increases (or decreases) when policy issues are framed accordingly, that is, when political actors explicitly make linkages between groups and policies. Second, in contrast to newer studies on group appeals as a general phenomenon, a large body of literature on ethnicity and race in the United States has analyzed parties' use of implicit and explicit messaging to African Americans and Latinos (e.g., Nteta & Schaffner, 2013).

**Definition**

Recent studies on the supply side of politics have begun to define and measure group appeals as a distinct concept. "Group-based appeals", according to Thau (2019, p. 65), are "explicit statements that link a political party to some category of people". Similarly, Stuckelberger and Tresch (2022, p. 5) define group appeals as the "explicitly stated support (positive group appeals) or criticism of group categories (negative group appeals) by parties or candidates". Dolinsky (2022, p. 2) departs from these definitions by defining "group appeals" as "explicitly stated support of some social group category(ies)". She excludes negative mentions of groups because the target groups of such negative appeals remain unclear, making them implicit rather than explicit appeals: when parties praise a group, such as immigrants, they clearly appeal to immigrants; but when they criticize immigrants, who are they trying to appeal to (Dolinsky,

2022)? All these definitions share the idea that group appeals are a distinct element of political communication that can interact with policy appeals in a variety of ways.

Whereas authors generally agree on the definition of group appeals, there is more disagreement when it comes to the definition of a social group and the types of groups that they analyze. Some studies only consider socio-demographic groups such as gender or social class (Dolinsky, 2022), while others also include group-related organizations like unions and businesses (Stuckelberger & Tresch, 2022; Thau, 2019), behavioral groups such as smokers and car drivers (Huber, 2022), or more abstract groups like "the nation" or "all" (Horn et al., 2021; Thau, 2019).

**Group appeals as dependent variable**

When it comes to explaining how candidates and parties use group appeals, a first important objective is to better understand the variation in the overall frequency of group appeals - over time and across different contexts and actors. Thau (2019) observes that group appeals in British party manifestos have become more frequent since 1965 and similarly Dolinsky (2022) identifies an – albeit more moderate – increase in such appeals for Israel and the Netherlands since 1975 using manifestos and print ads. Dolinsky (2022) and Stuckelberger (2019) find some evidence that left-wing parties use group appeals more frequently than right-wing parties, though this does not appear to be true across all party families.

A second important objective is to better understand the variation in group appeals to specific groups. Evans and Tilley (2017) and Thau (2019) investigate group appeals related to social class in British party manifestos and try to explain observed changes over the last decades with developments in the electoral market. According to both studies, the emphasis on traditional group constituencies such as workers has waned, while other group categories like families and parents receive more attention. Similarly, Thau (2018) examines group appeals in party programs by the Social Democratic Party in Denmark, showing how appeals toward non-economic groups have increasingly superseded class-related appeals.

Other studies try to conceptualize parties' incentives to use appeals towards particular groups based on voters' attitudes towards these groups or the electoral behavior of certain groups (Huber, 2022; Stuckelberger & Tresch, 2022). Looking at group appeals in election materials

of parties in Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, Stuckelberger and Tresch (2022) find that the use of positive and negative group appeals depends on the electoral support parties receive from various social groups as well as the attitudes their voters have towards particular groups.

In contrast to many previous studies on specific (ethnic) groups, the majority of studies on group appeals aim to map the entirety or a large segment of the group population included in political communication (Dolinsky, 2022; Stuckelberger, 2019; Thau, 2019). While Thau (2019) divides the population into economic groupings like businesses and workers and non-economic groups like families and women, Stuckelberger (2019) further distinguishes between life cycle categories, such as families and elderly people, and identity groups, such as women and immigrants. Furthermore, Dolinsky (2022) introduces the categories of ethnic and religious groups in her typology.

**Group appeals as independent variable**

When it comes to the effects of group appeals, previous research in the field has used group appeals to explain long-term changes in voting behavior. According to Evans and Tilley (2017), the significance of social class membership for voting behavior has decreased as a result of the declining number of class-based group appeals. Similarly, Thau (2021) shows that group appeals can accentuate or narrow differences in party support between distinct social classes, depending on which group ties are emphasized by political parties. In addition, Thau (2023) finds that while group appeals are an effective strategy for parties to boost their electoral support on their own, they also interact with and are reinforced by policy appeals.

A different strand of literature focuses on the short-term campaign effects of group appeals using survey experimental designs. Robison et al. (2021) examine the effect of symbolic class appeals on the likelihood of voting for a candidate among working class and middle-class voters. Stubager and Thau (2023) look more closely at the considerations that are activated by class-based group appeals and how they condition the effect on voters' evaluation of the sponsoring candidate, relying on open-ended survey responses. Finally, studies have also been interested in the effect of group appeals on voter support for parties' policy positions (Huber et al., 2024).

**(Future) developments of the literature**

Finally, we want to highlight some exciting directions for group appeal research. First, there is plenty of room for conceptual clarifications and innovations. In terms of the definition of group appeals, the literature is quite consolidated – although there are doubts around the inclusion of negative appeals. Clarifications are more important when it comes to the definition of a social group and the types of group categories included in the empirical analysis. Should the study of group appeals limit itself to socio-demographic groups, or also include appeals referencing group-related organizations (e.g., trade unions), behavioral groups (e.g., smokers) or abstract groups (e.g., "the nation")?

There may be some opportunities to incorporate ideas and concepts from research on issue competition and party policy positions. Based on the concept of issue yield, Huber (2022) develops the concept of group yield, which measures the electoral potential of group appeals for individual parties based on the sympathy towards a group among the general electorate and party supporters. Similarly, based on the concept of issue ownership, one might think of group ownership to describe a party that voters regard as the party that best represents the interests of a specific group.

Second, research on group appeals should delve deeper into their interaction with policy appeals in order to better understand how those two strategies are used independently or in combination and how this affects voters. On the one hand, this concerns their inclusion in the same argument: What are the policy issues where group appeals play a more or less important role? What are the effects of issue ownership on how parties combine group and policy appeals? On the other hand, this is about how they work together when they are directed towards a particular group, which relates to discussions about symbolic vs. substantive appeals (Nteta & Schaffner, 2013): How does the policy congruence of a party and a target group influence the use of group appeals?

Third, there is still much to be done in terms of measuring group appeals and group perceptions. To date, most studies have relied on a manual content analysis of election material to detect group appeals (Dolinsky, 2022; Thau, 2019). Given the often limited variation in how groups are described in political text – particularly when compared to policy issues – automated methods hold a lot of promise for scaling up longitudinal and cross-sectional analysis of group

appeals. This includes, for example, dictionary-based and machine-learning-based approaches. In addition, measuring voters' perceptions of groups as well as their perceptions of political parties' support or opposition of groups is frequently necessary to explain the usage and the effects of group appeals. This may be based on closed questions of a predetermined list of groups (Huber, 2022) or based on open-ended questions (Zollinger, 2022). It may also be based on questions that measure voters' group memberships and social identities, or their sympathy towards certain groups. For future research on group appeals it is therefore crucial that election studies and other large survey projects start to systematically include those items in their questionnaires, to avoid researchers having to field their own surveys.

Finally, the concept of group appeals can be fruitfully applied to other fields of study. In research on populism, as well as radical-right and radical-left parties, the support of groups that represent the "ordinary people" (e.g., workers, families, rural inhabitants) and the criticism of elite groups (e.g., politicians), as well as out-groups (e.g., migrants, criminals), play an important role and can be measured by focusing on group appeals. Similarly, studies on science and media skepticism may benefit from investigating negative group appeals against scientists and journalists. Moreover, it would be great to see more research on group appeals conducted outside of Europe, as the literature on group appeals is currently largely Euro-centric.

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