From Personal Experience to Policy: Biographical Issue Appeals and Legislative Commitment

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October 29, 2026

Abstract

Party labels and campaign issue agendas provide information about how candidates will govern, but may not reveal which issues they are most committed to prioritizing. I argue that biographical issue appeals—campaign messages linking candidates' personal experiences or professional backgrounds to policy positions—provide additional information about their legislative commitments. Using a supervised machine learning classifier on U.S. House campaign websites from 2018–2022, I find that 67% of candidates use these appeals, particularly those in competitive districts. A survey experiment shows that biographical issue appeals increase voters' perceptions of candidates' issue-specific competence and commitment. Finally, an analysis of original cosponsorships finds that candidates who use these appeals subsequently engage in more legislative activity on those issues than candidates who discuss them without invoking their biographies. Together, these findings show that understanding legislative representation requires examining not only which issues candidates discuss, but also how they communicate their commitments.

Word count: 9,793

Keywords: Congress, congressional elections, campaign communication, legislative behavior, text-as-data

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Party labels give voters broad expectations about how candidates will govern, and the issues candidates choose to discuss provide further information about their future legislative priorities (Sulkin 2009). Yet candidates often discuss many of the same salient issues and make broadly similar policy promises. Voters may therefore struggle to determine how strongly candidates are committed to prioritizing particular issues or how well-equipped they are to address them. This uncertainty matters because representative democracy depends, in part, on voters' ability to discern which commitments candidates are most likely to prioritize once elected (Mansbridge 2003).

Despite the nationalization of American politics and candidates' issue agendas, candidates still have reasons to communicate their future legislative priorities and distinguish themselves from other candidates discussing the same issues. Rather than competing as unified party slates, Democratic and Republican candidates must win party nominations and general elections in single-member districts. These electoral institutions encourage candidates to cultivate individual reputations and give voters reasons to support them specifically, rather than simply their party (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1987; Carey and Shugart 1995; Dancey, Henderson and Sheagley 2023). Moreover, in modern congressional elections, most congressional districts are safe for one party, and primary elections are increasingly competitive (Hirano and Snyder 2019; Cowburn 2024). Candidates therefore have an incentive to distinguish themselves from co-partisan candidates, as party labels are an unhelpful signal in primary elections. While prior work has demonstrated candidates differentiate themselves through their qualifications and issue positioning (e.g., Porter, Treul and McDonald 2024; Meisels 2026; Case 2027), I argue candidates also have an incentive to convey their legislative priorities beyond simply discussing an issue during the campaign.

One way candidates can communicate these differences is by connecting their policy positions to their personal experiences and professional backgrounds. I define these connections as biographical issue appeals. Rather than simply communicating what they hope to accomplish in office, biographical issue appeals provide candidates with an opportunity to explain

why particular issues matter to them and why they are especially qualified to address them. I argue that these appeals serve as signals of both competence in addressing an issue and heightened commitment to working on it. Importantly, the choice to explicitly connect a personal experience to a policy position may communicate information about a candidate's priorities beyond simply possessing that experience.

However, candidates have incentives to use these appeals to attract voter support, even if the issues they emphasize are not among their legislative priorities. Biographical issue appeals may therefore increase perceptions of competence and commitment without necessarily predicting subsequent legislative activity. Alternatively, these appeals may convey meaningful information about candidates' legislative priorities, beyond simply discussing an issue on the campaign trail. I evaluate this argument by addressing three related research questions: (1) when and which candidates use biographical issue appeals, (2) do voters perceive these appeals as signals of competence and commitment, and (3) do biographical issue appeals predict additional legislative activity beyond simply discussing an issue?

To answer these questions, I train a supervised machine learning classifier on a dataset of U.S. House campaign websites from 2018–2022 (Porter, Case and Treul 2025). I find that biographical issue appeals are a highly prevalent campaign strategy, utilized by 67% of candidates. Their use also follows strategic patterns: candidates in competitive districts, strong fundraisers, and those with previous political experience are significantly more likely to use them. Using a survey experiment, I show that connecting a policy position to a candidate's biography increases voters' perceptions of both competence and commitment on that issue. Finally, I find that candidates who utilize biographical issue appeals engage in significantly more legislative activity on those issues once elected, even compared to candidates who campaign on the same issue without making a biographical appeal. Specifically, biographical issue appeals are associated with approximately 10% more original cosponsorships on the corresponding issue, accounting for the increase associated with discussing the issue itself. Furthermore, I find evidence that explicitly invoking a relevant professional background can

predict legislative activity beyond simply possessing that background.

Ultimately, these findings demonstrate that biographical issue appeals are more than a strategy for cultivating individual reputations. Voters interpret these appeals as signals of heightened competence and commitment, and their use predicts additional legislative activity beyond simply campaigning on an issue. Together, these findings connect research on campaign appeals, voter evaluations, and legislative behavior by demonstrating that the personal experiences candidates invoke when discussing policy issues shape perceptions of commitment and provide additional information about their subsequent legislative priorities. Even within an increasingly nationalized electoral environment structured by political parties (Jacobson 2015; Hopkins 2018), individualized campaign communication can help connect electoral commitments to subsequent legislative representation.

Campaigns and Candidate-Centered Issue Messaging

Political campaigns are a mechanism through which candidates try to communicate with voters in order to distinguish themselves from their competitors, share their agenda, and ultimately persuade voters to vote for them (Druckman, Kifer and Parkin 2009). Persuasion, however, can be difficult as voters often lack detailed policy knowledge and are heavily influenced by their party identification. As such, effective campaigns are able to raise the salience of different considerations that lead voters to support one candidate over another (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Zaller 1992). Candidates can do this by focusing on issues that are "owned" by their party or by trying to focus on issues that are currently salient to voters (Petrocik 1996; Spiliotes and Vavreck 2002; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Kaplan, Park and Ridout 2006).

Candidates also have discretion in how they choose to message on issues. This discretion extends to the medium, (i.e. websites, social media, television, etc.), the type of message (negative attack, emotional targeting, etc.), and the delivery of the message (Lau, Sigelman and Rovner 2007; Geer 2008; Brader 2006; Albertson, Dun and Gadarian 2020).

One particularly potent style of messaging is the personal narrative (Kalla and Broockman 2020; Kubin et al. 2021; Naunov, Rueda-Canon and Ryan 2026). Naunov, Rueda-Canon and Ryan (2026), for example, find that personal narrative communication far outperforms messages that rely simply on facts or generic appeals. Similarly, Kubin et al. (2021) present compelling evidence that sharing personal experiences is successful in bridging moral divides and reducing political animus. Candidate backgrounds can work because they leverage a candidate's history or lived experience in a way that makes the message appear more credible and authentic and less scripted than standard campaign fare.

Candidates regularly use their backgrounds and experiences to persuade voters in congressional elections (Arbour and McGowen 2017; Porter, Case and Treul 2025), yet we lack a systematic analysis of how candidates use these backgrounds to anchor their issue positions. I define this concept as biographical issue appeals (BIA); specifically, instances where candidates invoke personal experiences or professional backgrounds in conjunction with an issue position, whether that be to justify their position, establish expertise, or make a personal connection to the issue. Candidates commonly share biographical information and issue stances separately, but a biographical issue appeal explicitly fuses the two. To illustrate the difference between a standard issue appeal and a biographical issue appeal, consider the contrast between two candidates messaging on healthcare in 2018. Todd Allen, a Democratic candidate running in Texas' 24th district included the following statement on healthcare on his campaign website:

> "60,000. In just the 24th District, that is the number of Americans who would lose healthcare coverage under the Republican House plan energetically supported by our current representative. Most of us would agree that healthcare insurance premiums are too high and that the cost of coverage is hurting more American families than it heals." – Todd Allen campaign website

Allen's campaign statement on healthcare is an example of a standard issue appeal that does not invoke his own personal experience. Instead, he directly attacks the Republican healthcare plan and the (Republican) incumbent representative in the district through this

issue messaging on healthcare. Kevin Abel, a Democratic candidate in Georgia's 6th district, provides a contrasting example. Abel's healthcare statement on his campaign website reads:

> "Healthcare is a right. All Americans must have access to quality, affordable care. After two decades of providing healthcare to hundreds of employees right here in the 6th District, I know what it's like to deal with double digit premium increases every year. As a cancer survivor, I know what it's like to worry more about your medical bill than your diagnosis." – Kevin Abel campaign website

In his statement, Abel makes two references to his biography, one related to his background as a businessman providing insurance to his employees and a second revealing his status as a cancer survivor. In contrast to Allen, Abel uses his biography as a means for underscoring his policy promise. I argue that biographical issue appeals, such as Abel's, function as a high-intensity signal of commitment to working on a specific issue. I posit that biographical issue appeals elevate both the signal that candidates are sending to voters and their actual commitment to working on an issue.

BIAs as Signals of Competence and Commitment

I argue that biographical issue appeals operate through two primary mechanisms: demonstrating competence in handling and commitment to addressing specific issues. First, by linking their background to a policy position, candidates can provide evidence that they possess relevant experience or expertise. Voters appear willing to use personal and professional backgrounds as meaningful information about a candidate's qualifications (Sellers 1998; McDermott 2005). Sellers (1998), for example, finds that candidates perform better among voters when they campaign on issues for which they possess a relevant personal background. Similarly, Costa and Pereira (2026) finds that legislators with occupational experience in fields such as education or healthcare are perceived as more credible and are more persuasive on related policy issues. Biographical issue appeals provide candidates with a way to make this relevant experience salient and signal their competence in handling a particular issue.

Beyond competence, biographical issue appeals can signal a stronger commitment to prioritizing an issue if elected. Although campaign rhetoric can provide meaningful information about future legislative priorities (Sulkin 2009), voters may still question whether candidates will follow through on their campaign promises. By tying a policy position to their own life experience, candidates can present that commitment as rooted in something more than electoral strategy. Consistent with Fenno (1978), candidates can use these appeals to communicate that they understand or personally share voters' concerns by claiming "I am one of you." When a candidate invokes their background as a veteran, small business owner, teacher, or cancer survivor to explain a policy position, that experience provides a reason for voters to believe that the candidate has a personal stake in addressing the issue.

Biographical issue appeals may therefore also communicate information about a candidate's future priorities. Because legislative time is limited, members of Congress cannot devote equal attention to every issue they discuss on the campaign trail. Linking a particular issue to a personal experience can signal that the issue will receive greater attention once the candidate enters office. Existing research provides reason for voters to make this connection. Legislators' professional backgrounds are associated with their subsequent legislative behavior; for example, Fountaine, Shepherd and Skinner (2025) find that physician members of Congress are more likely to work on healthcare legislation and are more legislatively effective on healthcare policy than non-physicians. Biographical issue appeals therefore provide voters with information not only about a candidate's ability to address an issue, but also about the issues that candidate is especially likely to prioritize.

Candidate Use of Biographical Issue Appeals

Given that biographical issue appeals may serve as signals of competence and commitment, I expect that candidates' decisions to use them will be shaped by both the electoral environment and characteristics of the individual candidate. Beginning with electoral conditions, I expect candidates running in competitive districts to be more likely to incorporate

BIAs into their campaign communications. In competitive districts, candidates may not be able to rely solely on copartisans to secure victory and may instead need to attract independents and persuade voters from the opposing party. Candidates therefore have greater incentives to use messages that enhance their likability while demonstrating competence and commitment.

If personal narratives are an effective tool for persuasion (Naunov, Rueda-Canon and Ryan 2026), candidates should be especially likely to adopt this strategy in competitive races. By emphasizing shared experiences and personal stakes, candidates can distinguish themselves while potentially appealing to voters beyond their partisan base. Compared to an impersonal campaign message or one focused strictly on partisan attacks, biographical issue appeals provide candidates with a way to present themselves favorably without necessarily alienating voters they need to persuade. I therefore expect:

> *H1*: Candidates in competitive electoral districts are more likely to engage in biographical issue appeals in their campaign rhetoric than candidates in safe districts.

Candidate characteristics should also shape the likelihood of using biographical issue appeals. In particular, I expect higher-quality candidates to be more likely to utilize BIAs. Two traditional measures of candidate quality are campaign resources and previous political experience (Jacobson 1989; Bond, Covington and Fleisher 1985). Fundraising remains an important indicator of candidate viability (Maestas and Rugeley 2008; Bonica 2017), and candidates with greater financial resources are more likely to operate professionalized campaigns and have the capacity to develop and refine persuasive messaging strategies, including through costly pre-testing of campaign messages (Hewitt et al. 2024). These resources can, in turn, support the professionalized campaign infrastructure necessary to develop more sophisticated messaging strategies.

Furthermore, candidates who have previously held elected office have already navigated at least one successful campaign and are therefore more likely to possess both an established

campaign infrastructure and experience identifying which aspects of their qualifications and backgrounds resonate with voters. Moreover, recent work demonstrates that voters may be increasingly receptive to a broader range of candidate backgrounds and experiences (Porter and Treul 2024), creating additional opportunities for candidates to make those backgrounds central to their campaign communications. I therefore define candidate quality in terms of both campaign resources and previous elected experience and expect:

> *H2*: Candidates with more resources (as measured through campaign fundraising) and candidates with previous elected experience (incumbents and experienced challengers) will be more likely to utilize biographical issue appeals in their campaign rhetoric.

Relatedly, I expect experienced challengers to engage in biographical issue appeals more frequently than incumbents. Incumbents and challengers differ in their campaign strategies and rhetoric (Druckman, Kifer and Parkin 2020; Sachleben and Treul 2026), in part because incumbents can rely on credit claiming in a way challengers cannot (Mayhew 1974). Incumbents can point to their legislative records as evidence of competence, while challengers must rely on other signals, including their personal and professional backgrounds. Experienced challengers are especially well-equipped to do so because they both have relevant experience to draw on and have experience running a successful campaign. Biographical issue appeals therefore provide these experienced challengers with a way to translate their experience into signals of competence and commitment. This leads me to expect:

> *H3*: Experienced challenger candidates are more likely to utilize biographical issue appeals in their campaign rhetoric than incumbent candidates.

Voter Perceptions of Biographical Issue Appeals

Campaigns are fundamentally oriented toward persuading and mobilizing voters. Because voters cannot know whether a candidate will actually prioritize an issue once in office, they

must rely on available cues to assess future behavior. I expect biographical issue appeals to function as meaningful signals of both competence and commitment. By invoking these personal experiences, candidates implicitly tell voters to perceive campaign promises as credible, issue-specific commitments rather than as generic policy statements. By anchoring policy in lived experience, candidates can employ a strategy that is effective at building credibility (Costa and Pereira 2026). A biographical issue appeal therefore provides voters with a reason to view a candidate's experience as evidence of both their ability to handle an issue and their commitment to prioritizing it. This leads me to expect:

> *H4*: Candidates utilizing a biographical issue appeal for a specific issue will be perceived as more competent in and more committed to handling that issue than candidates who present the same issue position without a BIA.

If biographical issue appeals enhance perceptions of competence and commitment, however, it raises the question of why candidates would not use them more frequently. In addition to the resource constraints discussed previously, candidates may be selective because biographical information can convey information beyond what they explicitly intend. Existing research demonstrates that voters use characteristics such as gender, race, social class, and occupational background to make broader inferences about candidates. Female and Black candidates, for example, are often perceived as more liberal than white or male candidates (McDermott 1998), candidates from working-class backgrounds are similarly perceived as more liberal (Carnes and Sadin 2015), and voters use occupational backgrounds to make additional inferences about candidate ideology (Kirkland and Coppock 2017). Some backgrounds may also carry broader electoral disadvantages; working-class candidates, for example, tend to perform worse in primary elections (Treul and Hansen 2023). Candidates may therefore have reason to be selective about which aspects of their backgrounds they make salient.

One particularly important potential trade-off concerns how voters perceive a candidate's competence and commitment across issues. A biographical issue appeal may establish ex-

pertise in one area while also signaling specialization. Members of Congress have limited time and cannot possess expertise or devote equal attention to every issue, creating incentives to specialize (Krehbiel 1991) and necessitating mechanisms for coping with their time constraints, such as relying on party leadership for information (Curry 2015). Voters may therefore interpret a strong signal of commitment to one issue as implicit information about how a candidate will allocate their attention once in office, and may infer what this means for (not) prioritizing other policy issues. This leads me to hypothesize:

> *H5*: Candidates utilizing a biographical issue appeal for a specific issue will be perceived as relatively less competent in and less committed to handling distinct, unrelated issues compared to candidates who present the same issue positions without a BIA.

Ultimately, the value of biographical issue appeals as signals depends on whether they predict future behavior. If voters interpret these appeals as indicators of a candidate's competence and priorities, the next question is whether those campaign commitments translate into actual legislative effort once the candidate enters office.

BIAs and Legislative Follow-Through

Previous work demonstrates that campaign messaging can serve as a roadmap for future legislative priorities. For example, Sulkin (2009) finds that the issues candidates emphasize during campaigns predict subsequent legislative activity. Similarly, Ringquist and Dasse (2004) show that members' roll-call behavior is consistent with their environmental campaign messaging. At the same time, candidates are electorally motivated (Mayhew 1974) and may strategically leverage their backgrounds for electoral benefit (Case and Treul 2024). Given voters' limited knowledge of congressional activity, members may also communicate about their records in ways that do not fully reflect their legislative contributions (Grimmer, Westwood and Messing 2014). Biographical issue appeals may therefore represent either meaningful commitments or simply effective campaign rhetoric.

There is reason to expect, however, that candidates' backgrounds are related to their legislative priorities. Personal experiences and identities shape both the positions legislators take and how they allocate their time (Burden 2007). Female legislators are more likely to champion women's interests (Reingold 2008; Cowell-Meyes and Langbein 2009), racial minorities and veterans are more likely to work on behalf of constituents who share their identity characteristics (Lowande, Ritchie and Lauterbach 2019), and members born in or near their districts devote more attention to constituency-focused activity (Crosson and Kaslovsky 2025). I therefore argue that explicitly linking an issue to one's biography creates a stronger commitment than simply discussing the same policy position. This leads me to expect:

> *H6*: Candidates who utilize a biographical issue appeal on an issue will be more legislatively active on that issue in office than candidates who discuss the issue without a biographical issue appeal.

Importantly, I expect the choice to invoke a particular experience to provide information beyond possessing the background itself. While a candidate's background shapes legislative behavior (Burden 2007), specifically choosing to connect that background to a policy position is a conscious decision that signals the issue is a particular priority. Consistent with this, existing research demonstrates that voters respond not only to background characteristics, such as veteran status, but also to how those characteristics interact with campaign messaging (McLaughlin, Geras and Rhinehart 2024). I therefore expect:

> *H7*: Candidates who choose to utilize a biographical issue appeal regarding a specific background experience will demonstrate higher levels of legislative activity on that issue than candidates who possess the same background experience but do not use a BIA on that issue.

By comparing candidates with similar biographical characteristics, but who differ in whether they invoke those experiences during their campaigns, I can isolate the effect of possessing a relevant background from the additional commitment communicated through choice to use a biographical issue appeal.

Data & Methods

To test the hypotheses related to candidate usage of biographical issue appeals (H1-H3), I analyze campaign websites for congressional primary election candidates in the 2018, 2020, and 2022 election cycles (Porter, Case and Treul 2025). Campaign websites provide candidates with an opportunity to communicate their policy positions and proposals on specific issues and are widely used among primary election candidates. From 2018-2022, over 87% of candidates had a campaign website, and 85% of those candidates included an issue platform on their website (Porter, Case and Treul 2025). Although campaign websites typically include both biography pages and issue pages, I focus on the text of issue statements because I am interested in how candidates connect their personal experiences and professional backgrounds to the policy positions they take.

Campaign websites can act as an "information hub" for a candidate's campaign (Hernson, Panagopoulos, and Bailey 2019), and potential voters and donors view campaign websites as a useful resource for finding out information about a candidate, especially their issue positions. Given this, candidates will dedicate significant time and resources to crafting their issue messaging strategy on their campaign websites knowing that voters, donors, and journalists may visit them to learn about the candidate (Druckman, Kifer and Parkin 2009). Sulkin, Moriarty and Hefner (2007) also conduct an analysis of campaign communications across a variety of media, such as campaign websites and televised advertisements, and find that position taking on campaign websites is consistent with other forms of campaign communication. Unlike television advertisements that can be very costly to produce and to air, campaign websites are a much cheaper and more accessible way for candidates to share their issue positions and overall message with potential supporters. Importantly, candidates can choose which issues they want to include in their campaign website and they are also free to talk about those issues in any way they would like. This means that candidates are free to present information using whatever rhetorical strategies they desire, such as biographical issue appeals. It is for these reasons that I focus on candidate campaign websites when

analyzing when and how candidates engage in biographical issue appeals in their campaign communication. Overall, my analysis focuses on 4,506 U.S. House candidates who ran in primary elections between 2018 and 2022 and had campaign websites, which collectively contain a total of 142,838 individual issue statement paragraphs.

Before evaluating which candidates engage in biographical issue appeals, it is first necessary to identify these appeals in candidate issue statements. I define biographical issue appeals as instances in which a candidate discusses her background and personal experience in conjunction with her position on a particular issue. To identify biographical issue appeals, I adapt the categories laid out in Arbour and McGowen (2017), which identify several aspects of a candidate's biography that could constitute a biographical appeal, such as local connections to a district, references to a candidate's family, education, religion, or occupation, or stories of hardships candidates have overcome. A full description of the categories I use for defining biographical issue appeals is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Biographical Issue Appeal Categories

Category	**Description**
Local Roots	Candidate references being born in or growing up in local region, state, or district
Parents	Candidate references their parents, grandparents, or upbringing
Family	Candidate references their spouse/partner and/or children
College	Candidate references their educational background, particularly as it relates to where they went to college or being first generation
Military	Candidate references their time serving in the military or their status as a veteran
Religion	Candidate references their religious beliefs and their practicing of those beliefs
Government	Candidate references previous government experience, either elected or unelected
Business	Candidate references their business background/business accolades
Hardship	Candidates references or describes a hardship in their life that they have overcome
Resume	Candidate references previous occupational experience outside of those listed in previous categories (e.g. being a doctor or a teacher)
Other	Candidate references other aspects of their biography or identity not captured by previous categories (e.g. being a gun owner)

Note: Table presents the types of experiences a candidate could reference in the context of a biographical issue appeal. These categories have been adapted from Arbour and McGowen (2017).

Using these categories as my coding scheme, I rely on a supervised machine learning classification pipeline. I hand labeled a sample of 17,347 issue statement paragraphs for whether a candidate engaged in a biographical issue appeal in that paragraph, and divided my hand-labled data into a training and validation set. Because the classification of biographical issue appeals is a nuanced language task, I rely on OpenAI's "text-embedding-3-small" model to generate a representation of the text for each individual issue statement paragraph using a transformer architecture. Embeddings are a numerical representation of text in a high-dimensional space that capture the overall context and semantic meaning of each issue statement paragraph. I use the embeddings for each of the paragraphs in my training data as the input for training five different machine learning models to predict whether a paragraph

is a biographical issue appeal. I make out-of-sample predictions on all unlabeled issue statement paragraphs as well as a held out validation set, and I use the outputs generated by the best performing model, support vector machine (F1 = 0.784), for the subsequent analyses.[1] This then allows me to assess which candidates engage in biographical issue appeals and under what conditions.

To test my hypotheses related to voter perceptions of biographical issue appeals (H4–H5), I conduct a survey experiment that presents respondents with candidate issue messaging and directly probes the competence and commitment mechanisms underlying biographical issue appeals.[2] The survey was administered by Verasight to a nationally representative sample of 1,500 respondents.[3] The study employs a within-subject randomized design in which each respondent evaluates an issue statement from three separate candidates. This structure allows respondents to evaluate multiple candidate messages while independently randomizing the presence of a biographical issue appeal across each iteration.

In each iteration, respondents are randomly assigned to view either a biographical issue appeal treatment or a control statement. Both conditions present a candidate discussing a position on a particular issue. In the treatment condition, however, the candidate explicitly connects that position to a relevant personal experience, while the control condition presents the same substantive issue position without the biographical connection. This design therefore holds the candidate's stated policy position constant while varying whether the candidate invokes a personal experience as a reason for their engagement with the issue. A sample biographical issue appeal treatment and the corresponding control statement pairing are presented in Table 2.[4]

[1] More information on the supervised machine learning pipeline as well as validation metrics can be found in Appendix A.

[2] Hypotheses 4 & 5 were preregistered. The preregistration and the corresponding analysis plan can be found at `https://osf.io/rsdjm/overview?view_only=3c3321825afd41e1ad6e8ff98580939c`.

[3] All participants were offered a consent form at the outset of the survey, and participation in the survey was conditional on voluntary consent. Payment was predetermined by Verasight, and was calculated based on the survey length. The survey was approved by a university Institutional Review Board.

[4] The text for all biographical issue appeal treatment and control pairs, for both Democratic and Republican candidates, can be found in Appendix B.

Table 2: Example Biographical Issue Appeal Treatment: Healthcare

Biographical Issue Appeal Treatment	Control
We need to have solutions to address rising healthcare costs. **I've worked in the healthcare system every day of my career, and I've treated countless patients. As a physician, I have seen firsthand** how government-controlled healthcare drives up costs and destroys patients' quality of care. **I'll use my experience working with patients** and insurance companies to reduce healthcare costs by increasing competition and transparency. **I took an oath to do no harm,** and I'll always make sure Americans are empowered to make their own healthcare decisions.	We need to have solutions to address rising healthcare costs. We all know how government-controlled healthcare drives up costs and destroys patients' quality of care. In Congress, I'll work with insurance companies to reduce healthcare costs by increasing competition and transparency and I'll always make sure Americans are empowered to make their own healthcare decisions.

Note: Bolded text identifies language in the treatment condition that explicitly connects the candidate's healthcare position to their experience as a physician.

Following each candidate statement, respondents provide two evaluations of the candidate in relation to the issue they discussed. First, respondents rate how competent they perceive the candidate to be in handling the issue that the candidate discussed. Second, respondents rate how committed they perceive the candidate to be to working on that issue. Both outcomes are measured using five-point Likert scales, with higher values indicating greater perceived competence or commitment. These measures provide the primary outcomes for H4, which evaluates whether adding a biographical issue appeal to an otherwise similar issue position increases perceptions of the candidate's competence and commitment on that issue.

To evaluate whether these benefits come with costs on other issues, respondents are also asked the same competence and commitment questions about a second, randomly selected issue that the candidate did not discuss. Both the discussed and not-discussed issues are drawn from a pool of eight issues, with issues drawn without replacement across the three candidate evaluations.[5] As a result, each respondent evaluates candidates across six distinct

[5]The pool of 8 issues consists of education, healthcare, military, immigration, crime, guns, abortion, and agriculture.

issue contexts over the three iterations: three issues discussed directly by the candidates and three not-discussed issues that are used to measure potential spillover effects of a biographical issue appeal into evaluations of the candidate on other issues. The outcomes related to the not-discussed issues provide the tests of H5, which evaluates whether a biographical issue appeal in one domain leads voters to perceive the candidate are relatively less competent or committed elsewhere. To reduce noise arising from out-party evaluations, respondents are presented with candidates that align with their self-identified party affiliation. Pure independents are randomly assigned to evaluate either Democratic or Republican candidates and remain within that party condition across all iterations of the experiment.[6]

Finally, to test my hypotheses related to biographical issue appeals and legislative follow-through (H6-H7), I focus on bill cosponsorship as a measure of legislative activity, following the work of Sulkin (2009). Specifically, I use original cosponsorship as my primary measure of legislative activity. Although there can only be one sponsor of a bill, a bill can have multiple original cosponsors, or members who are listed as cosponsors on the date that the bill is introduced. Original cosponsorship is a stronger indicator of substantive legislative activity than cosponsorship at later stages of the legislative process (Curry and Roberts 2023). According to interviews conducted by Curry and Roberts (2023), original cosponsorship often reflects meaningful legislative collaboration, with original cosponsors typically considered equal partners in developing a piece of legislation. As such, original cosponsorship provides a measure of substantive legislative effort and commitment to particular policy issues, allowing me to evaluate the relationship between campaign appeals and subsequent campaign promisekeeping.[7]

To collect data on original cosponsorship, I use Congress.gov's API to gather information on all bill introductions and cosponsorships in the House of Representatives for the 116th, 117th, and 118th Congresses. Overall, I identify 143,914 original cosponsorships across 34,607

[6] All subsequent analyses remain consistent when pure independents are excluded.

[7] I also report results using a member's total cosponsorships as a measure of legislative activity, and the conclusions remain consistent.

bills. Because subsequent legislative activity can only be observed for candidates who won election to the House, this analysis is restricted to the 1,306 candidates in my sample for whom legislative behavior can be observed.

Given that I am interested in explaining whether candidate biographical issue appeals on an issue lead to more legislative activity *on that issue*, I must identify what issue a campaign website statement is primarily discussing and also what related issue area a bill is about. The data from Porter, Case and Treul (2025) include a policy code, adapted from the Policy Agendas Project, for each candidate issue statement. While it is important to recognize that an issue statement can touch on more than one political issue, the coding in these data identifies one major policy area that an issue statement is primarily about. I rely on this coding for identifying the primary issue area of each candidate issue statement. Additionally, the data from Congress.gov provides a policy area term that is assigned to every bill and resolution introduced in Congress. The policy area assignment is done by legislative analysts in the Congressional Research Service, and the policy area term chosen is the one that best describes the primary focus of each measure.[8] Overall, the campaign website data link candidate issue statements on campaign websites to 13 policy codes, and the bills coding from CRS links bills to 32 major topic areas. However, there is significant overlap between the campaign website issue statement policy codes and the CRS policy areas. I rely on this overlap to map the bill policy areas to the policy codes from the campaign website data and use these linkages to determine if a candidate campaigned on policy area and then followed through on that campaign priority by sponsoring legislation in that major topic area. The specific coding scheme for linking CRS policy areas to policy codes is presented in Appendix C. Using this linkage as a guideline, I can then evaluate whether biographical issue appeals are related to more legislative action on that issue once in office.

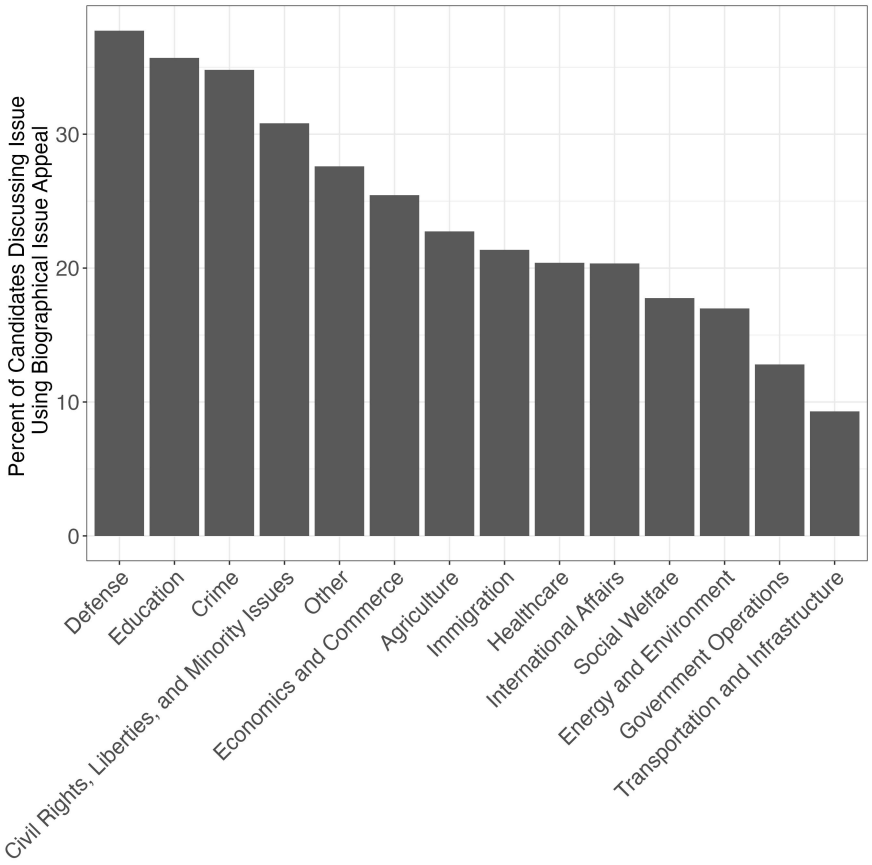
[8] See CRS explanation for more information: `https://www.congress.gov/help/field-values/policy-area`.

Results

Overall, approximately 20% of all issue statements were classified as containing a biographical issue appeal. However, when aggregating the data from the statement-candidate-year level to the candidate-year level, 67% of all candidates engage in at least one biographical issue appeal in their campaign website issue platform. Of the candidates engaging in biographical issue appeals, candidates engage in between 1 and 20 of these appeals, with a median of 2 and a mean of 3 biographical issue appeals on a candidate's campaign website. Additionally, 70% of those candidates engaging in these appeals have between 1 and 3 biographical issue appeals on their campaign website.

There is also great variation regarding the issue areas candidates are more likely to talk about when using biographical issue appeals. A breakdown of the frequency with which candidates engage in biographical issue appeals on each of the major policy areas is presented in Figure 1. When examining this figure, the results appear to line up with common sense expectations of which major policy areas are more conducive to biographical issue appeals. For example, given the nature of the topics, it makes sense that far more candidates would engage in a biographical issue appeal on the topic of education than on infrastructure.

Figure 1: Percent of Candidates Engaging in Biographical Issue Appeals by Issue Area



Note: Bars represent the percentage of candidates discussing each issue area who utilize at least one biographical issue appeal when discussing that issue.

Candidate Usage of Biographical Issue Appeals

To test my hypotheses surrounding which candidates will engage in biographical issue appeals and under what electoral conditions (H1-H3), I fit a logistic regression model in which the outcome variable is a binary variable for whether or not a candidate engages in a biographical issue appeal on her campaign website. To code this variable, a candidate receives a value of 1 if any of her campaign website issue statements in a given election cycle contain a biographical issue appeal. If none of a candidate's issue statements were classified as a biographical issue appeal, then that candidate receives a 0. The key independent variable to test H1 about electoral competition is a binary variable for district competitiveness based

on the previous presidential vote share in that district. Districts in which the Democratic presidential candidate won between 45% and 55% of the two party vote share are classified as competitive, and districts that are safe for either the Democratic or Republican party are considered safe districts. To test hypotheses H2 and H3, the independent variables of interest are candidate experience and candidate fundraising (which serves as a proxy for candidate quality). I utilize a factor variable to indicate whether a candidate is the incumbent legislator, a candidate with previous elected experience, or an inexperienced candidate. I also use data from the FEC website to measure candidate fundraising. Specifically, I focus on candidate fundraising prior to the date of the primary election, or preprimary receipts. This allows me to focus only on the campaign funds that a candidate received prior to the primary election and ignore the funds that a candidate may have raised after winning a primary election and demonstrating their viability as a candidate. Rather than use the raw value of preprimary receipts, I use the logged value of preprimary receipts for each candidate. For candidates who did not receive any campaign contributions, I hold their fundraising value at zero, rather than taking the log. In addition to the independent variables of interest, I also control for a number of other factors related to both candidate characteristics and electoral conditions that may influence the likelihood a candidate engages in a biographical issue appeal. For candidate characteristics, I include a binary variable for whether or not a candidate is female and for whether or not a candidate is Black. Related to electoral conditions, I control for primary election type and whether or not a primary election is contested (features more than one candidate). To measure primary type, I classify each type of primary election into partisan or non-partisan. Non-partisan primaries are primary elections in which Democratic and Republican candidates compete together in the same field. These non-partisan primaries include states with top-two and top-four primaries as well as Louisiana, which holds a single election on election day rather than a primary election. All other types of primary election (open, closed, and partially-closed) are classified as partisan primaries. I also cluster standard errors at the candidate level to account for dependencies within-candidate across years. The

results of the logistic regression are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Candidates Engaging In Biographical Issue Appeals

	Dependent variable:
	Presence of Biographical Issue Appeal
Competitive District	0.262^{***}
	(0.087)
Experienced Candidate	0.283^{*}
Ref: Incumbent	(0.152)
Inexperienced Candidate	-0.339^{***}
Ref: Incumbent	(0.121)
Fundraising	0.072^{***}
	(0.008)
Female	0.151^{*}
	(0.084)
Black	-0.460^{***}
	(0.114)
Republican	-0.110
	(0.077)
Partisan Primary	0.055
	(0.110)
Contested Primary	-0.196^{*}
	(0.102)
Constant	0.367^{*}
	(0.194)
Year Fixed Effects	✓
Observations	4,502

Note: Table presents logit coefficients with standard errors clustered by candidate in parentheses. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

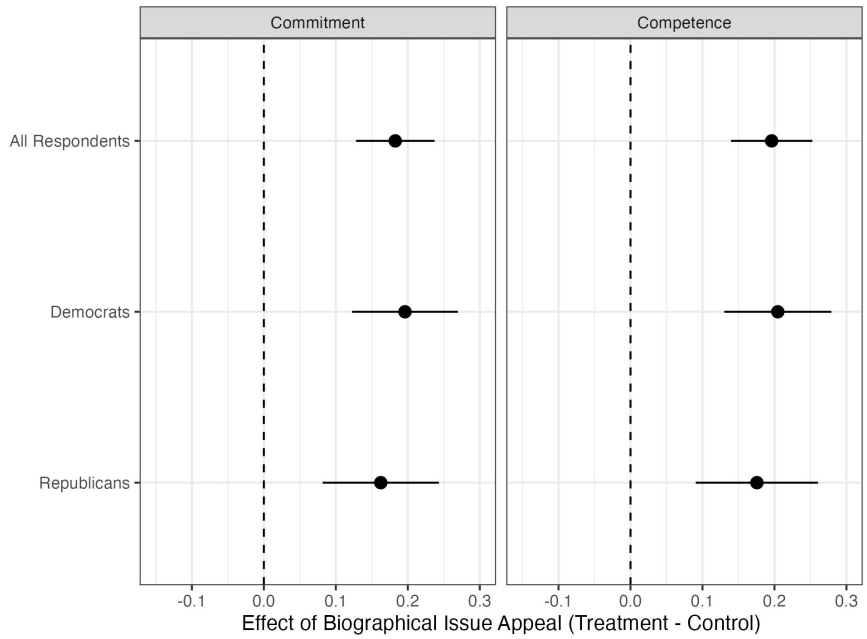
The results from this model indicate support for my hypotheses. In support of H1, candidates in competitive districts are approximately five percentage points more likely to utilize

a biographical issue appeal on the issue page of their campaign website than candidates running in safe districts ($p<0.05$). This suggests that candidates, particularly those who face a tough general election battle, will engage in biographical issue appeals, perhaps as a method of broadening their messaging across party lines in order to secure enough votes to achieve victory. My hypotheses related to candidate quality and candidate experience also receive support. In support of H2, candidate quality appears to be related to the likelihood that a candidate engages in a biographical issue appeal in their campaign website rhetoric. Candidates who are stronger fundraisers are more likely to utilize biographical issue appeals ($p<0.01$), and both incumbents and challengers with previous political experience are more likely than political amateurs to leverage biographical issue appeals in their issue platform ($p<.01$). There is also evidence suggesting that, consistent with H3, challengers with previous political experience are more likely to utilize biographical issue appeals on their campaign website than incumbents ($p<0.1$). Perhaps this is because incumbent candidates are largely engaged in credit claiming in their campaign communications and do not need to rely on their background outside of their job as the current member of Congress.

Biographical Issue Appeals and Voter Perceptions

I next evaluate whether biographical issue appeals shape voters' perceptions of candidates' competence and commitment. As described previously, H4 predicts that connecting a candidate's background to an issue position will increase perceived competence and commitment on the issue discussed, while H5 predicts that these gains may come with corresponding costs on unrelated issues. Figure 2 presents the estimated effect of receiving a biographical issue appeal, relative to the control condition, on perceptions of competence and commitment toward the issue discussed. The figure presents estimates for the full sample as well as separately for respondents evaluating Democratic and Republican candidate profiles, consistent with the preregistered analysis plan. Complete regression results are presented in Appendix D.

Figure 2: Effect of Biographical Issue Appeal on Perceptions of Candidate's Competence and Commitment to Issue Discussed



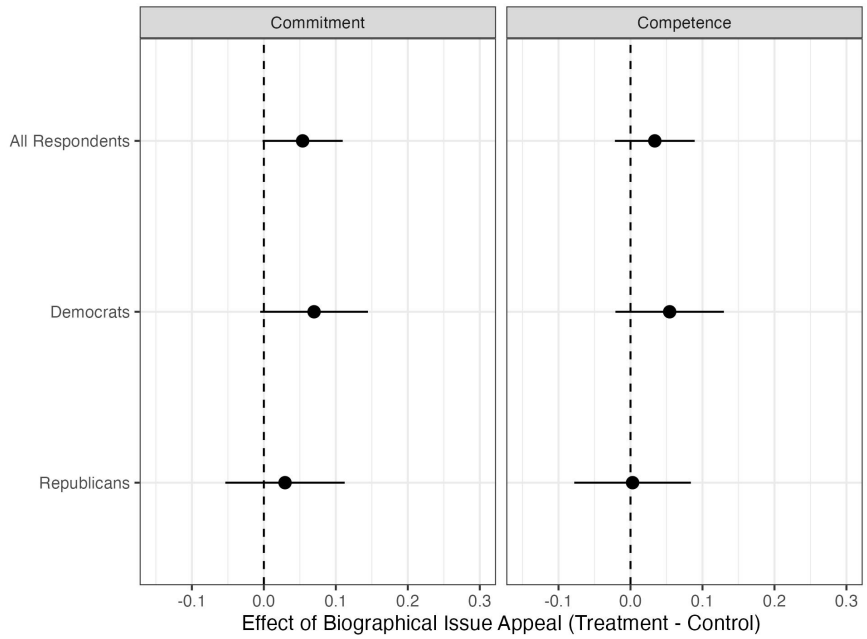
Note: Points represent OLS estimates of the effect of receiving a biographical issue appeal relative to the control condition. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals calculated using standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Higher values indicate greater perceived competence or commitment. Complete regression results are presented in Appendix D.

The results provide consistent support for H4. As shown in Figure 2, candidates utilizing biographical issue appeals are perceived as both more competent on and more committed to addressing the issue discussed than otherwise identical candidates who present the same issue position without connecting it to their personal background. These effects are statistically and substantively significant for both outcomes across all respondents and among those evaluating Democratic and Republican candidate profiles. In other words, when candidates invoke a relevant personal experience, voters appear to interpret that experience as meaningful information about both the candidate's ability to work on that issue as well as their commitment to working on it.

Figure 3 evaluates whether the benefits from a biographical issue appeal come with corresponding costs. H5 predicts that a high-intensity signal of competence and commitment on one issue may lead voters to perceive the candidate as relatively less competent or committed

on other issues. However, I find little evidence of this broader negative spillover. On average, candidates utilizing biographical issue appeals are not perceived as less competent on or less committed to addressing an unrelated issue than candidates in the control condition. This pattern is again generally consistent across respondents evaluating Democratic and Republican candidate profiles. Overall, while biographical issue appeals generate clear reputational benefits on the issues to which they are attached, I find little evidence that these benefits come with a loss in perceived competence or commitment elsewhere.

Figure 3: Effect of Biographical Issue Appeal on Perceptions of Candidate's Competence and Commitment to Issue Not Discussed



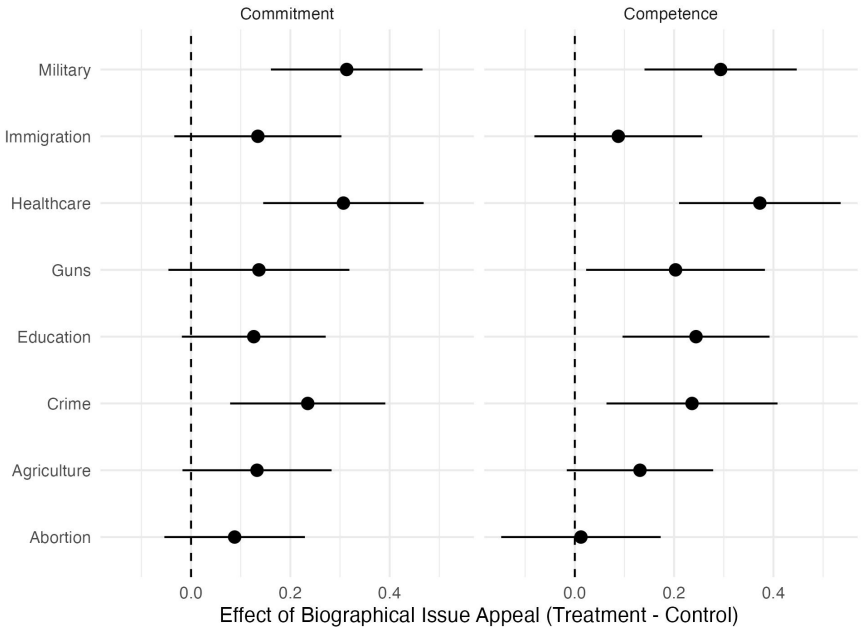
Note: Points represent OLS estimates of the effect of receiving a biographical issue appeal relative to the control condition. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals calculated using standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Higher values indicate greater perceived competence or commitment on the unrelated issue. Complete regression results are presented in Appendix D.

The lack of an average penalty for using a biographical issue appeal does not necessarily imply that all of these appeals operate similarly. Candidates differ substantially in how they invoke personal experiences, which also means that the information these appeals make salient to voters differs, so pooling across issue areas could potentially obscure meaningful heterogeneity in the effects of these appeals. I therefore conduct an exploratory analysis

examining the treatment effect separately for each issue included in the experiment.

Figure 4 first presents the issue-specific effects on competence and commitment toward the issue discussed. The results suggest that the aggregate benefits documented in Figure 2 are not driven entirely by a single biographical issue appeal. Across most issues, discussing a relevant personal experience increases perceptions of either competence, commitment, or both. At the same time, the magnitude of these effects varies across issues, which suggests that the signal sent through a biographical issue appeal depends in part on the particular background and issue being connected.

Figure 4: Effect of Biographical Issue Appeal on Perceptions of Candidate's Competence and Commitment to Issue Discussed, by Issue

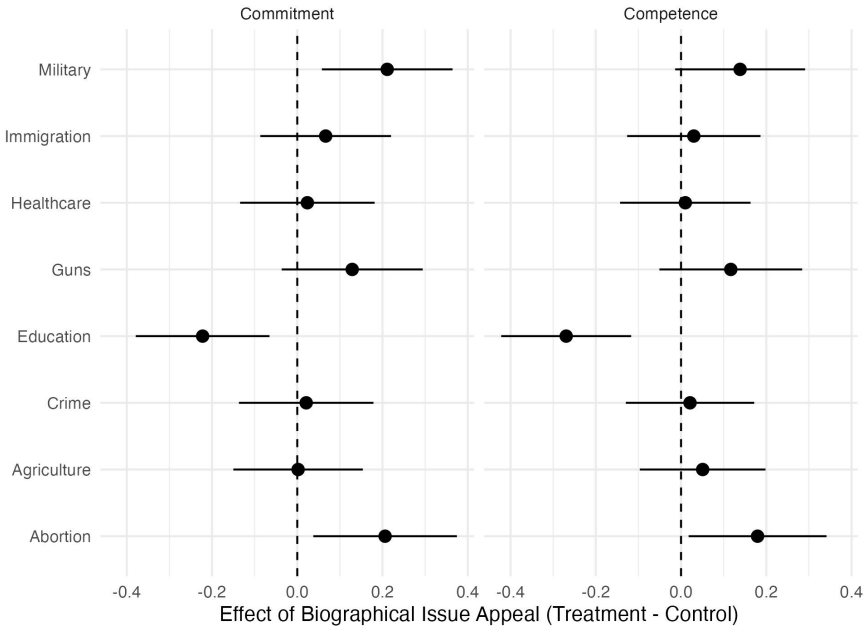


Note: Points represent issue-specific OLS treatment effects for receiving a biographical issue appeal relative to the control condition. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals calculated using standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Higher values indicate greater perceived competence or commitment. These analyses were not preregistered and should be interpreted as exploratory.

Figure 5 provides shows the corresponding issue-specific effects on not-discussed issues. Consistent with the overall results, most issue-specific estimates provide little evidence of a negative spillover from using a biographical issue appeal. The education appeal stands out as the one context in which the treatment produces a statistically significant loss in

perceptions of competence and commitment on an unrelated issue. This pattern provides some slight evidence that the costs of biographical issue appeals may be conditional on the particular experience candidates invoke rather than a broader consequence of emphasizing one's background. Because these analyses are exploratory, however, I interpret this finding cautiously.

Figure 5: Effect of Biographical Issue Appeal on Perceptions of Candidate's Competence and Commitment to Issue Not Discussed, by Issue



Note: Points represent issue-specific OLS treatment effects for receiving a biographical issue appeal relative to the control condition. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals calculated using standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Higher values indicate greater perceived competence or commitment. These analyses were not preregistered and should be interpreted as exploratory.

Biographical Issue Appeals and Legislative Follow-Through

Finally, I model the relationship between campaign appeals and legislative activity in the subsequent Congress for candidates who won election to the House of Representatives in 2018, 2020, and 2022. In this model, I evaluate whether those who use biographical issue appeals on an issue are more likely to follow through in office than candidates who campaign on that issue without including a biographical issue appeal. To model this, I use a negative binomial model in which the outcome variable is a count of the number of original cosponsorships per

member of Congress per policy area. The key independent variables for this analysis are two indicators demonstrating whether the member campaigned on that issue and whether the member campaigned on that issue using a biographical issue appeal. In this model, I also include member-Congress fixed effects and policy area fixed effects. The policy area fixed effects account for the fact that some policy areas receive much more action in Congress than others. For example, in the 116th Congress there were 1,337 bill introductions on the topic of health (with 11,777 original cosponsors), but only 227 on the topic of energy (with 1,547 original cosponsors). Including policy area fixed effects accounts for the different baseline levels of bill introductions and cosponsorships that each policy area has. In addition to policy area fixed effects, I also include member-Congress fixed effects. This means a member of Congress serving in the 116th, 117th, and 118th Congresses would have three different fixed effects. These fixed effects allow to control for unobserved, time-invariant and time-varying characteristics that may impact a member of Congress' level of legislative activity (e.g., majority party status). By including member-Congress fixed effects, I am essentially comparing a member's behavior to themselves on other issues in that particular year. The results of the negative binomial model, in which the unit of observations is the member-Congress-policy area, are presented in Table 4.

Beginning with the issue appeal variable, the results from this model suggest that members of Congress who mention an issue on the campaign trail are original cosponsors of significantly more bills on that issue in Congress ($p<0.001$). In substantive terms, members of Congress who discuss an issue on their campaign website are original cosponsors of approximately two more bills on that issue area than members who do not include a statement on that issue in their campaign platform (which represents a 34% increase in original cosponsorships on an issue). This finding is consistent with the work of Sulkin (2009) and suggests that issue statements on campaign websites are indeed strong signals of a candidates' legislative priorities and activities once in office. Turning to the biographical issue appeals variable, when controlling for policy area and the specific qualities and character-

Table 4: Biographical Issue Appeals and Legislative Activity, 116th-118th Congress

	Dependent variable:	
	Original Cosponsorships	Total Cosponsorhips
Issue Appeal	0.297***	0.275***
	(0.016)	(0.014)
Biographical Issue Appeal	0.097***	0.083***
	(0.019)	(0.017)
Constant	−0.285	0.386
	(0.263)	(0.221)
Member-Congress FE	✓	✓
Policy Area FE	✓	✓
Observations	14,716	14,716

Note: Entries are negative binomial regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Models include member-Congress and policy-area fixed effects. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001.

istics of an individual member in a given Congress, a candidate engaging in a biographical issue appeal on an issue is associated with a significant increase in the number of original cosponsorships that a member pursues on that issue (p<0.001). Controlling for whether a member of Congress campaigns on an issue, members of Congress who utilize a biographical issue appeal on their campaign website have a predicted increase of 0.5 more original cosponsorships on that issue (a 10% increase). This finding suggests that beyond candidates who make generic or impersonal campaign statements on an issue, candidates who use a biographical issue appeal are more likely to be legislatively active on that issue. By explicitly linking their background to a policy stance, candidates provide a meaningful signal of commitment that exceeds the baseline effect of merely including an issue statement on their platform. This indicates that biographical issue appeals are indeed a heightened signal of commitment, and that a candidate is likely to follow through on those issues once in office.

To further examine whether the increase in legislative activity is associated with the background experience itself or the strategic choice to highlight that experience during the campaign as a biographical issue appeal, I conduct a secondary analysis focusing on vet-

erans, doctors, and teachers in Congress. This allows me to begin testing H7 by holding a background characteristic constant and examining the variation in how candidates chose to message on that background. Specifically, among candidates who share the same biographical experience (service in the military, being a doctor, or being an educator), does the act of utilizing a biographical issue appeal on background-related issues predict a higher level of legislative follow-through than simply possessing that biographical characteristic?

To test this, I subset the data to include only the military veterans, doctors, and educators who served in the 116th, 117th, or 118th Congress.[9] I then restrict the analysis to the policy area that is relevant for that member's background characteristic. Specifically, I focus on veterans and the defense policy area, doctors and the healthcare policy area, and teachers and the education policy area. Consistent with the previous model, I use a negative binomial regression to evaluate the relationship between biographical issue appeals among veterans and subsequent legislative activity on defense, educators and subsequent activity on education, and doctors and subsequent activity on healthcare. I also present the pooled results and include policy area fixed effects. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 5.[10]

The results of this analysis suggest that even among a group of individuals who share a significant life experience, the strategic choice to utilize that experience in campaign rhetoric is a meaningful predictor of legislative behavior. Among former teachers in Congress, those who utilized a biographical issue appeal on the issue of education during their campaign were associated with a significant increase in original cosponsorship on education bills compared to teachers who campaigned on education without an explicit biographical link. The results are consistent for doctors[11] and healthcare, but it does not appear to be the case that veterans engaging in a biographical issue appeal on the issue of defense are engaging in

[9]The data for doctors, teachers, and veterans serving in Congress comes from Fountaine, Shepherd and Skinner (2025), The Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, and member's Wikipedia pages.

[10]I only report the results using original coponsorship as the dependent variable. However, results remain consistent when total cosponsorship is the measure of legislative activity.

[11]All doctors in Congress campaigned on healthcare, so there is no coefficient for "issue appeal" in the doctors model.

Table 5: Biographical Issue Appeals and Legislative Activity: Doctors, Teachers, Veterans

	Dependent variable: Original Cosponsorships			
	Doctors	Teachers	Veterans	Combined
Issue Appeal	—	0.149	0.315**	0.235**
		(0.145)	(0.099)	(0.080)
Biographical Issue Appeal	0.361*	0.372**	0.051	0.172*
	(0.171)	(0.140)	(0.086)	(0.070)
Constant	2.251***	1.776***	2.109***	2.059***
	(0.188)	(0.121)	(0.083)	(0.073)
Policy Area FE	—	—	—	✓
Congress FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	106	315	472	893

Note: Entries are negative binomial regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Models include Congress fixed effects and the pooled model includes policy-area fixed effects. All doctors campaigned the issue of healthcare. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001.

significantly more legislative activity on defense than those veterans who do not campaign using a biographical issue appeal.

This analysis necessarily focuses on occupational backgrounds because they provide a set of observable experiences that can be identified across members of Congress. As previously discussed, however, biographical issue appeals are not limited to occupational experiences. Candidates and members may also invoke experiences as parents, patients, or survivors of particular hardships, among many other possibilities. Because it is not possible to systematically observe the full universe of experiences that could plausibly provide the basis for a biographical issue appeal, occupational backgrounds provide a particularly useful test of whether subsequent legislative behavior reflects simply possessing a relevant background or the strategic choice to emphasize that background while campaigning.

Still, these results provide initial support for H7, suggesting that biographical issue appeals function as distinct, meaningful commitments that go beyond a candidate's resume or baseline interests. Ultimately, the relevant signal appears to stem not merely from possessing

a relevant background, but from the strategic choice to connect that background explicitly to a policy issue.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the strategic use, perception, and legislative follow-through of biographical issue appeals in contemporary American politics. Through an analysis of campaign websites and subsequent legislative activity, I find that biographical issue appeals are a prolific strategy in congressional campaigning, utilized by nearly 70% of candidates. Furthermore, rather than being a mere campaign tactic, these appeals serve as a meaningful signal of commitment to future legislative activity.

The survey experiment provides evidence for why candidates may find these appeals strategically valuable. Holding a candidate's substantive issue position constant, connecting that position to personal experience increases voters' perceptions of both the candidate's competence on the issue and their commitment to addressing it. These results suggest voters treat biographical experiences as meaningful signals of what candidates are likely to prioritize. At the same time, however, I find little evidence for the negative spillover effect that I anticipated. Candidates utilizing biographical issue appeals are not, on average, perceived as less competent or less committed to other issues. These results do not suggest that candidates have no reason to avoid using biographical issue appeals. Candidates have limited campaign space, differ in the experiences they can credibly invoke, and may have incentives to emphasize some parts of their background while avoiding others. While not examined in this paper, it could also be the case that relying on biography too frequently produces negative consequences.

The legislative follow-through analysis provides evidence that the signals from biographical issue appeals are credible. Members of Congress who utilize biographical issue appeals engage in significantly more legislative activity on those issues than on issues where they offered generic stances or did not campaign at all. Furthermore, the analysis comparing

candidates who share similar occupational backgrounds provides evidence that this relationship is not just a product of a candidate possessing a relevant background. Candidates who explicitly connected their professional experience to the corresponding issue subsequently engaged in greater legislative activity than similarly situated candidates who discussed the same issue without emphasizing that biographical connection. These results suggest that the choice to highlight an experience on the campaign trail carries information beyond simply possessing the experience itself.

There remains significant room to explore heterogeneity in both the use and effects of biographical issue appeals. My findings indicate that BIA usage is not uniform across candidates, and the exploratory survey results similarly suggest that different types of appeals may generate different voter responses. Future work should therefore more systematically evaluate whether occupational experience, parenthood, military service, personal hardship, illness, or other forms of lived experience communicate different types of competence, levels of commitment, or information about candidates more generally. These questions are particularly important as candidates enter Congress with an increasingly wide variety of personal and professional backgrounds (Porter and Treul 2024).

More broadly, these findings speak to a central challenge of representative democracy: how voters can distinguish which policy commitments candidates are likely to prioritize once elected. Party labels and campaign issue agendas provide meaningful information, but candidates who advocate similar positions may differ in how strongly they are committed to addressing particular issues. Biographical issue appeals provide one way for candidates to communicate these differences. By selectively linking their personal experiences to policy positions, candidates can communicate not only what they support, but also why particular issues matter to them and why they are especially qualified to address them. My findings suggest that these connections provide meaningful information beyond simply discussing an issue on the campaign trail. Ultimately, these findings demonstrate that understanding the relationship between campaign communication and legislative representation requires

attention not only to which issues candidates discuss, but also to how they communicate their commitments to those issues.

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From Personal Experience to Policy: Biographical Issue Appeals and Legislative Commitment

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Supporting Information

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A Biographical Issue Appeal Classification

A.1 Supervised Machine Learning Pipeline

The complete supervised machine learning pipeline I use to classify biographical issue appeals in candidate campaign websites is as follows. I hand labeled a random sample of 5,429 candidate issue statements to determine whether a candidate engaged in a biographical issue appeal in that particular issue statement. Rather than labeling each issue statement as a binary of whether a candidate engaged in a biographical issue appeal or not, I separated the text to the paragraph level to add more granularity to the identification of biographical issue appeals. Issue statements are often several paragraphs long and it is common that a biographical issue appeal is contained within a single paragraph in an issue statement. As such, I hand-labled 17,347 paragraphs (from the 5,429 issue statements) for whether a candidate engaged in a biographical issue appeal in that particular paragraph. As mentioned, the data contain 43,495 issue statements (142,839 paragraphs) from over 4,500 congressional candidates. It is therefore not feasible to indentify these biographical issue appeals entirely by hand. Instead, I take advantage of recent advancements in machine learning to classify candidate issue statements as being biographical issue appeals or not.

To do this, I first divide my hand labeled data into a training set and a validation set. Of the 17,347 issue statement paragraphs I hand labeled, I use 14,797 paragraphs (85%) as training data and 2,550 paragraphs (15%) as validation data. Because my classification task is a nuanced language task, I rely on OpenAI's "text-embedding-3-small" model to generate a representation of the text for each individual issue statement paragraph using a transformer architecture. Embeddings are a numerical representation of text in a high dimensional space that capture the overall context and semantic meaning of each issue statement paragraph. Using these contextualized embeddings enables me to capture nuanced language properties that could not be captured by a bag-of-words representation, including the nuanced language candidates use to engage in a biographical issue appeal. I use the embeddings for each of the paragraphs in my training data as the input for training five different machine learning models to predict whether a paragraph is a biographical issue appeal. Following recommendations from Rodriguez and Spirling (2022), I engage in minimal text preprocessing. I then use these embeddings to train five classification models: support vector machine, random forest, gradient boosting, ridge regression, and lasso regression. For all models, I select model parameters using a 5-fold cross validation grid search. For each of the five candidate models, I make out-of-sample predictions for all unlabeled issue statement paragraphs as well as the 2,550 paragraphs that were held out as a validation set. Validation metrics for each of the five candidate models are presented in Table 6.

I select the machine learning model, support vector machine (SVM) that performs best on the classification of the target class, biographical issue appeals, and take steps to improve the model's performance. Specifically, I select the 500 edge cases closest to the decision boundary and hand label those paragraphs. I then add those newly hand labeled paragraphs to my initial training data and re-train each of the five candidate models with the updated training data while still performing 5-fold cross validation grid search to select model parameters. I then make out-of-sample predictions for all unlabeled issue statement paragraphs as well as the same 2,550 paragraphs that serve as a held out validation set. The output

generated from each of the five models is a binary variable indicating whether or not an issue statement paragraph is a biographical issue appeal. I use the outputs generated by the best performing model, SVM (F1 = 0.784), for the analyses relating to H1-H3. Specifically, I use the paragraph-level predictions and aggregate the paragraphs back up to the statement level to determine whether an individual issue statement contains a biographical issue appeal.

A.2 Supervised Machine Learning Validation

Table 6: Out-of-Sample Validation Metrics of Biographical Issue Appeals Classification

	Accuracy	Precision	Recall	F1
SVM	0.966	0.745	0.827	0.784
Ridge	0.945	0.587	0.880	0.704
Gradient Boost	0.945	0.606	0.780	0.682
Lasso	0.766	0.254	0.989	0.404
Random Forest	0.939	0.790	0.257	0.387

B Treatment and Control Vignettes

B.1 Democratic Candidate Biographical Issue Appeals

Table 7: Democratic Candidate Treatment and Control Statements

Issue Area	**Biographical Issue Appeal**	**Control**
Education	[I've spent my career teaching special education and elementary students in the public school system. As an educator,] I believe all of our children deserve access to a high-quality education that prepares them for their future, whether it's a four-year college or a career and technical school. That means reducing class sizes, fully funding special education programs, reining in college tuition costs and student debt. I will [use my experience as an educator] to make sure our schools, students, and teachers have the resources they need.	I believe all of our children deserve access to a high-quality education that prepares them for their future, whether it's a four-year college or a career and technical school. That means reducing class sizes, fully funding special education programs, reining in college tuition costs and student debt. I will work to make sure our schools, students, and teachers have the resources they need.
Healthcare	We need to have solutions to address rising healthcare costs. [I've worked in the healthcare system every day of my career], and while we can provide excellent care, it comes at an alarmingly high price. [As a physician, I've spent years talking and listening to my patients], understanding their needs, and working with them to create solutions that help them to live healthier and more productive lives. In Congress, I will [use my experience] to work towards the most effective solutions for our district and our nation.	We need to have solutions to address rising healthcare costs. While we have the capacity to provide excellent care, it comes at an alarmingly high price. In Congress, I will work closely with patients to understand their needs and working with them to create solutions that help them to live healthier and more productive lives. We will work towards the most effective solutions for our district and our nation.

Issue Area	Biographical Issue Appeal	Control
Military	[As someone who has served in our military, I fully understand] the sacrifices our service members and their families make to protect our democracy. In Congress, I will [use my experience to] advocate for smart, strategic defense policies that keep our country safe while honoring our values. I'll fight for legislation that supports military families, improves conditions for deployed troops, and invests in long-term care for our veterans. [As a veteran, I remember the transition back to civilian life and how difficult it was.] I will always work to address the crisis of veteran homelessness and ensure access to comprehensive mental health services for our heroes.	The sacrifices our service members and their families make to protect our democracy cannot be understated. In Congress, I will advocate for smart, strategic defense policies that keep our country safe while honoring our values. I'll fight for legislation that supports military families, improves conditions for deployed troops, and invests in long-term care for our veterans. I will always work to address the crisis of veteran homelessness and ensure access to comprehensive mental health services for our heroes to help them with the transition back to civilian life, and beyond.
Crime	The safety of our communities is a top priority. [As a former prosecutor, I've seen how] crime can stem from a combination of factors, many of which are outside of the perpetrator's control. In Congress, I'll work to make our communities safer by investing in proven violence prevention strategies and strengthening services that address the root causes of crime. I will [use my experience with the justice system] to work alongside law enforcement and community leaders to build trust, ensure accountability, and deliver justice for victims of violent crime.	The safety of our communities is a top priority. We all know how crime can stem from a combination of factors, many of which are outside of the perpetrator's control. In Congress, I'll work to make our communities safer by investing in proven violence prevention strategies and strengthening services that address the root causes of crime. I will work alongside law enforcement and community leaders to build trust, ensure accountability, and deliver justice for victims of violent crime.

Issue Area	Biographical Issue Appeal	Control
Immigration	America is a nation of immigrants, [and my family is among those] who came here seeking freedom, safety, and opportunity. [As an immigrant myself, I've had the privilege to experience the American Dream firsthand.] I believe we must build an immigration system that is fair, humane, and consistent with our values. In Congress, I'll work to protect legal pathways to citizenship, support Dreamers and immigrant families, and ensure that our immigration policies strengthen both our economy and our communities. I'll fight to make sure that other immigrant families seeking a better life in the United States can come here to achieve one, [just like I did.]	America is a nation of immigrants, countless families have come here seeking freedom, safety, and opportunity. Immigrants from all over deserve the chance to experience the American Dream. I believe we must build an immigration system that is fair, humane, and consistent with our values. In Congress, I'll work to protect legal pathways to citizenship, support Dreamers and immigrant families, and ensure that our immigration policies strengthen both our economy and our communities. I'll fight to make sure that immigrant families seeking a better life in the United States can come here to achieve one.
Guns	[I grew up in a rural community where hunting and responsible gun ownership were a way of life. As a gun owner myself], I believe we can both respect the Second Amendment and take common-sense steps to reduce gun violence. In Congress, I'll support policies that keep firearms out of the hands of dangerous individuals, promote safe storage, and invest in community-based violence prevention—while protecting the rights of law-abiding gun owners [like myself.]	I know that we can both respect the Second Amendment and take common-sense steps to reduce gun violence. In Congress, I'll support policies that keep firearms out of the hands of dangerous individuals, promote safe storage, and invest in community-based violence prevention—while protecting the rights of law-abiding gun owners.

Issue Area	Biographical Issue Appeal	Control
Abortion	I will always defend a women's right to choose. One in four women in the United States will have an abortion in their lifetime, [and I am one of them. The decision to terminate my pregnancy was the most difficult decision I've ever had to make, but it was necessary. Theres no telling where I would be today if I was forced to carry that pregnancy to term. As I know,] women's healthcare decisions should be made between a woman and her doctor. In Congress, I will fight to protect women's reproductive healthcare and will champion legislation that removes unconstitutional barriers to abortion access, especially when the life of the mother or child is at risk.	I will always defend a women's right to choose. One in four women in the United States will have an abortion in their lifetime, and we need to ensure that these women have access to safe procedures and comprehensive reproductive care. Women's healthcare decisions should be made between a woman and her doctor. In Congress, I will fight to protect women's reproductive healthcare and will champion legislation that removes unconstitutional barriers to abortion access, especially when the life of the mother or child is at risk.
Agriculture	[As a farmer, I understand that] agriculture is the backbone of rural America and a vital part of our economy. [Running a successful farming operation, I know firsthand] the challenges that farmers face—from rising input costs to extreme weather and unpredictable markets. In Congress, I'll work to ensure that farmers have the tools and support they need to thrive, including access to fair trade, reliable infrastructure, and sustainable practices that protect our land for future generations. I'll be a strong voice for rural communities and for policies that help family farms succeed.	Agriculture is the backbone of rural America and a vital part of our economy. I will work to address the challenges that our farmers face—from rising input costs to extreme weather and unpredictable markets. In Congress, I'll work to ensure that farmers have the tools and support they need to thrive, including access to fair trade, reliable infrastructure, and sustainable practices that protect our land for future generations. I'll be a strong voice for rural communities and for policies that help family farms succeed.

B.2 Democratic Candidate Biographical Issue Appeals

Table 8: Republican Candidate Treatment and Control Statements

Issue Area	**Biographical Issue Appeal**	**Control**
Education	[I've spent my career as an elementary school teacher. As a teacher, I have seen the curriculum, class schedules, and test scores and can attest] that we need to get back to the basics. A high-quality education provides the foundation for a good job, which is fundamental to creating stronger families and a higher quality of life. Let's get back to basics and ask teachers to teach our children and allow parents to raise them. In Congress, [I'll use my experience as a teacher] to fight for what is best for our students and their families.	Education is important, and it's important that we get back to the basics. A high-quality education provides the foundation for a good job, which is fundamental to creating stronger families and a higher quality of life. Let's get back to basics and ask teachers to teach our children and allow parents to raise them. In Congress, I vow to always fight for what is best for our students and their families.
Healthcare	We need to have solutions to address rising healthcare costs. [I've worked in the healthcare system every day of my career, and I've treated countless patients. As a physician, I have seen firsthand] how government-controlled healthcare drives up costs and destroys patients' quality of care. [I'll use my experience working with patients] and insurance companies to reduce healthcare costs by increasing competition and transparency. [I took an oath to do no harm,] and I'll always make sure Americans are empowered to make their own healthcare decisions.	We need to have solutions to address rising healthcare costs. We all know how government-controlled healthcare drives up costs and destroys patients' quality of care. In Congress, I'll work with insurance companies to reduce healthcare costs by increasing competition and transparency and I'll always make sure Americans are empowered to make their own healthcare decisions.

Issue Area	Biographical Issue Appeal	Control
Military	[As someone who has served in our military,] I understand the dynamic and complex threats to our national security and the sacrifices made by our troops and their families to preserve our democracy. [I will use my experience to] promote legislation that helps our military families, minimizes risks for our forward deployed troops, and strengthens our defense posture through a robust military strategy. [As a veteran, I fully understand the needs and issues for our service members and veterans.] I will always stand with veterans and work to make sure they achieve the highest level of care and response.	I understand the dynamic and complex threats to our national security and the sacrifices made by our troops and their families to preserve our democracy. I will promote legislation that helps our military families, minimizes risks for our forward deployed troops, and strengthens our defense posture through a robust military strategy. I also believe we must take care of the men and women who have sacrificed so much to serve our country. I will always stand with veterans and work to make sure they achieve the highest level of care and response.
Crime	The safety of our country and community continues to be my top priority. [As a prosecutor, I've seen] how violence is often the result of many factors including a lack of economic opportunity, broken families, and various behavioral and mental health problems. I am committed to working with law enforcement to decrease violence in our communities. [I will use my experience as a prosecutor] to continue to do my best to seek justice for victims of violent crimes.	The safety of our country and community continues to be my top priority. I know violence is often the result of many factors including a lack of economic opportunity, broken families, and various behavioral and mental health problems. I am committed to working with law enforcement to decrease violence in our communities and delivering justice for victims of violent crimes.

Issue Area	Biographical Issue Appeal	Control
Immigration	America is a nation of immigrants, [and my family is among those] who came here seeking freedom, safety, and opportunity. [As an immigrant myself, I have had the privilege to experience the American Dream firsthand.] When the laws are enforced, giving time for the arriving immigrants to assimilate and time for the economy to adjust to the arriving population, then legal immigration is good for the United States. In Congress, I'll [use my experience to] help craft policies that support legal immigration while ensuring national security and economic stability.	America is a nation of immigrants and countless families have come here seeking freedom, safety, and opportunity. That is the American Dream. When the laws are enforced, giving time for the arriving immigrants to assimilate and time for the economy to adjust to the arriving population, then legal immigration is good for the United States. In Congress, I'll help craft policies that support legal immigration while ensuring national security and economic stability.
Guns	[I grew up in a rural community where hunting was a way of life, and in a home with safely stored firearms. As a gun owner myself,] I understand the need to respect the Second Amendment while making America safer and more responsible. To continue to safeguard our rights while simultaneously keeping firearms away from would-be criminals, we must empower law enforcement with the tools required to enforce existing laws.	I understand the need to respect the Second Amendment while making America safer and more responsible. To continue to safeguard our rights while simultaneously keeping firearms away from would-be criminals, we must empower law enforcement with the tools required to enforce existing laws.

Issue Area	Biographical Issue Appeal	Control
Abortion	I am proudly pro-life. [When pregnant with our first child, I developed serious complications. Doctors recommended an abortion, but I refused. Today, my son is alive, healthy, and we could not be prouder of him. I can't even imagine what life would be like without him in our lives, which is what would've happened if the doctors had their way. My experience with my son taught me] that every life is precious and deserves our protection. I will work to advance common sense protections for women and their unborn children, including preventing late-term abortion and stopping taxpayers from having to pay for abortions.	I am proudly pro-life. I believe that every life is precious and deserves our protection. I vow to fight every day and to be a voice for the voiceless, and in Congress I will work to advance common sense protections for women and their unborn children, including preventing late-term abortion and stopping taxpayers from having to pay for abortions.
Agriculture	[As a farmer, I understand that] agriculture is the backbone of America. [Owning a successful, cattle, hay, and grain farming operation, I know first-hand the hard decisions that farmers must make on a daily basis.] Farmers feed and fuel our nation, and their success is essential to a strong economy and secure future. [I will take my work ethic, learned on the farm,] to Congress to be a champion of agriculture and fight for fair trade deals for all our nation's farmers.	Agriculture is the backbone of America. Farmers feed and fuel our nation, and their success is essential to a strong economy and secure future. It is critical that we continue to listen to and support the agriculture community with the assistance they need to thrive. In Congress, I will work tirelessly to be a champion of agriculture and fight for fair trade deals for all our nation's farmers.

C Mapping Campaign Website Issue Statement Policy Codes to CRS Bill Policy Areas

Table 9: Mapping Issue Statement Policy Codes to Bill Policy Areas

Website Policy Code	**Congressional Reasearch Service Policy Area**
Agriculture	Agriculture and Food
Civil Rights and Liberties	Civil Rights and Liberties, Minority Issues; Native Americans
Crime	Crime and Law Enforcement
Defense	Armed Forces and National Security
Economics and Commerce	Economics and Public Finance; Commerce; Finance and Financial Sector; Taxation; Foreign Trade and International Finance
Education	Education
Energy and Environment	Energy, Environmental Protection, Public Lands and Natural Resources
Government Operations	Congress; Government Operations and Politics
Healthcare	Health
International Affairs	International Affairs
Immigration	Immigration
Social Welfare	Housing and Community Development; Social Welfare; Families
Transportation and Infrastructure	Transportation and Public Works; Water Resources Development

D Survey Experiment Full Model Results

Table 10: Biographical Issue Appeals and Perceived Competence on the Issue Discussed

	All Respondents	Democrats	Republicans
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Biographical Issue Appeal	0.196***	0.205***	0.176***
	(0.029)	(0.038)	(0.043)
Republican	−0.129***	—	—
	(0.039)		
Constant	4.133***	4.310***	3.817***
	(0.046)	(0.052)	(0.069)
Issue Discussed Control	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	4,489	2,314	2,175
R^2	0.029	0.048	0.023
Adjusted R^2	0.027	0.045	0.020

Note: Standard errors in parentheses are clustered at the respondent level. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

Table 11: Biographical Issue Appeals and Perceived Commitment on the Issue Discussed

	All Respondents	Democrats	Republicans
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Biographical Issue Appeal	0.183***	0.196***	0.162***
	(0.028)	(0.037)	(0.041)
Republican	−0.100*	—	—
	(0.039)		
Constant	4.368***	4.414***	4.219***
	(0.042)	(0.049)	(0.060)
Issue Discussed Control	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	4,491	2,315	2,176
R^2	0.034	0.052	0.025
Adjusted R^2	0.032	0.049	0.021

Note: Standard errors in parentheses are clustered at the respondent level. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

Table 12: Biographical Issue Appeals and Perceived Competence on an Unrelated Issue

	All Respondents	Democrats	Republicans
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Biographical Issue Appeal	0.034	0.054	0.003
	(0.028)	(0.038)	(0.041)
Republican	0.009	—	—
	(0.037)		
Constant	3.159***	3.270***	3.042***
	(0.057)	(0.073)	(0.082)
Issue Discussed Control	Yes	Yes	Yes
Issue Not Discussed Control	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	4,487	2,314	2,173
R^2	0.025	0.048	0.025
Adjusted R^2	0.022	0.042	0.018

Note: Standard errors in parentheses are clustered at the respondent level. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

Table 13: Biographical Issue Appeals and Perceived Commitment on an Unrelated Issue

	All Respondents	Democrats	Republicans
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Biographical Issue Appeal	0.054	0.070	0.029
	(0.028)	(0.038)	(0.042)
Republican	0.012	—	—
	(0.038)		
Constant	3.103***	3.172***	3.038***
	(0.059)	(0.077)	(0.083)
Issue Discussed Control	Yes	Yes	Yes
Issue Not Discussed Control	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	4,486	2,314	2,172
R^2	0.024	0.051	0.019
Adjusted R^2	0.020	0.045	0.012

Note: Standard errors in parentheses are clustered at the respondent level. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.