Biographical Issue Appeals and Legislative Follow-Through

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Abstract

Candidates utilize various issue messaging strategies to persuade voters, yet biographical issue appeals—linking personal background to specific issue positions—remain understudied. Candidates may engage in biographical issue appeals to signal competence, relatability, or a credible commitment. This paper examines biographical issue appeals in campaign communications and investigates the factors associated with candidates' use of this issue messaging strategy. Using campaign website data from 2018-2022 primary elections for the U.S. House, I find that both candidate characteristics (e.g. gender, race, and political experience) and electoral conditions (e.g. district competitiveness) are related to the likelihood that candidates utilize biographical issue appeals. Furthermore, I demonstrate that these appeals are a credible commitment to work on issues once in office. Members of Congress who utilize a biographical issue appeal on an issue engage in more legislative activity on that issue than members who do not use these appeals in their campaign communications.

In 2022, Marie Glusenkamp Perez (WA-3) fought through a crowded primary field to advance to the general election and ultimately win a seat in the House of Representatives in Washington's 3rd congressional district. Glusenkamp Perez campaigned heavily on her own experience running an auto repair shop with her husband, and connected with voters by telling her story. Glusenkamp Perez included a statement on small business on her campaign website:

> "My husband and I are the proud owners of an auto repair shop and we love our jobs, but its not easy to run a small business in America right now. We have to navigate the SBA, OSHA, the IRS, the EPA, local permitting and licensing; deliver quality, affordable service to our customers and most importantly recruit and retain the best employees. We need political leadership that respects the trades and understands the challenges facing small businesses, and in Congress, I will use my experience creating my business to support American manufacturing, cut through red tape, and streamline services Main Street businesses need to succeed." – Marie Glusenkamp Perez (WA-03) campaign website

Once in Congress, the fifth bill Glusenkamp Perez introduced was to change the reporting standards for small businesses across the United States. This example highlights just one instance of a candidate campaigning on how her background sets her up well to tackle political issues, and then following through with legislative actions on that issue once in office.

The primary goal of any congressional candidate is to appeal to enough voters such that she wins both her primary and general election contests. In order to achieve this goal, candidates run campaigns that allow them to communicate information about their background and policy positions to potential donors, voters, and the public. Two main functions of a congressional campaign are to persuade potential voters to support the candidate and to preview a candidate's policy goals. Despite this, voters are inherently skeptical of candidates' campaign promises. As Sulkin (2009) notes, voters frequently state "candidates' appeals are merely 'cheap talk'... with little connection to what they actually plan to do as policy

makers." This trend has continued in recent years, with Rasmussen Polls in 2014[1] and 2021[2] finding that just 4% and 13% of voters say most politicians keep their campaign promises in office, respectively. As a result, candidates need to go above and beyond to actually demonstrate to voters they plan on following through on these commitments.

How candidates communicate on issues is important because the issue positions that candidates take are highly salient to many voters (Ryan and Ehlinger 2023). While there countless issue messaging strategies at candidates' disposal (see Hewitt et al. 2024), one that has not been studied are biographical issue appeals, which I define as when candidates use their own personal experiences in conjunction with their issue position. Candidates frequently use their backgrounds, previous occupations, and personal experiences to persuade voters to support them in elections (e.g. Arbour and McGowen 2017; McDonald, Porter and Treul 2020). However, biographical issue appeals, such as the one used by Glusenkamp Perez, go a step further by explicitly invoking their background to gain credibility and demonstrate commitment on a given issue. This raises the question: when and who uses biographical issue appeals and do candidates who use biographical issue appeals actually follow through on them once in office?

In this paper, I answer these questions by first theorizing about the candidate characteristics and electoral conditions that are likely to be associated with increased use of biographical issue appeals. I argue that candidates in competitive districts and higher quality candidates (stronger fundraisers and those with political experience) are more likely to utilize biographical issue appeals in their campaign communications. I also hypothesize that candidates who use these biographical issue appeals will be more legislatively active on those issues in Congress. To measure when candidates use biographical issue appeals, I rely on a dataset of campaign websites for U.S. House candidates from 2018-2022 (Porter, Case and Treul 2025). I use a supervised machine learning classifier to identify instances of biographical

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[1] https://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/general_politics/november_2014/just_4_say_candidates_keep_their_campaign_promises

[2] https://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/biden_administration/is_biden_keeping_his_campaign_promises_voters_are_doubtful

issue appeals in candidates' policy platforms. In total, 68% of candidates use at least one biographical issue appeal on their campaign website. In line with my expectations, I find that candidates in competitive districts, strong fundraisers, and candidates with previous political experience are more likely to use biographical issue appeals, while inexperienced challengers and Black candidates are less likely. In addition, I also find that candidates who use biographical issue appeals are more likely to follow through on that issue if elected to office than candidates who do not use these appeals. I conclude by discussing electoral and legislative implications of these results.

Campaigns and Issue Messaging

When on the campaign trail, candidates attempt to communicate information to potential voters in order to attract enough support to win a primary election and general election contest. Political campaigns are a mechanism through which candidates try to distinguish themselves from their competitors, share their agenda, and persuade voters to vote for them (Druckman, Kifer and Parkin 2009). A plethora of political science literature is dedicated to studying what issues congressional candidates should campaign on. Some scholars suggest that candidates should focus on party owned issues, or those issues where the candidate's party has a built in advantage (Petrocik 1996; Spiliotes and Vavreck 2002), while other scholars suggest candidates should run on issues that are highly salient to voters, regardless of whether they are owned by a particular party (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Kaplan, Park and Ridout 2006). Beyond choosing what issues to run on, candidates also have a lot of leeway in how they choose to message on those issues. Through various forms of campaign communications, such as campaign websites, social media, and television advertisements, candidates have a wide variety of issue messaging strategies at their disposal, many of which have been thoroughly researched. In their quest to persuade voters, candidates can engage in negative appeals that attack the opposition (e.g. Lau, Sigelman and Rovner 2007; Lau

and Rovner 2009; Geer 2008) , target the emotions of potential voters (e.g. Brader 2006; Albertson, Dun and Gadarian 2020), or deliver their campaign messages through trusted messengers (e.g. Zaller 1992; Iyengar and Valentino 2000; Searles, Spencer and Duru 2020).

One strategy that is understudied in campaign communications is how candidates use their own backgrounds to explain their issue positions. This is somewhat surprising considering 1) explicitly weaving together biography and issue positions is something candidates do regularly and 2) there are numerous theoretical reasons for why candidates might be motivated to employ this strategy. First, candidates typically convey information about both their biography and their issue positions. For example, nearly one-third of congressional candidates that air television advertisements convey biographical information in those advertisements at least once (Arbour and McGowen 2017). Additionally, over 70% of all primary election candidates have a biography page and an issue platform on their campaign website, and that percentage is even higher when restricting the sample to include only candidates who have a campaign website (Porter, Case and Treul 2025). While this statistic does not explitcly demonstrate how frequently candidates use biographical issue appeals to explicitly link their background to their issue positions, there are a variety of reasons why candidates might be motivated to do just that. First, research from the field of political psychology suggests that personal appeals are a particularly effective form of persuasion (Kalla and Broockman 2020; Kubin et al. 2021; Naunov, Rueda-Canon and Ryan 2025). Biographical issue appeals are essentially a form of personal appeals because a candidate explicitly links their background to their position on a specific issue, thereby adding a personal touch. If this is indeed a persuasive messaging strategy, as suggested by existing literature, then we would expect candidates to leverage it in their campaign communications. Furthermore, candidates might want to share more information about their background in order to appear more likeable and relateable to a broad range of voters. Consistent with Fenno (1978), congressional candidates might engage in biographical issue appeals to demonstrate to potential voters "I am one of you." Beyond general references to biography, candidates

might want to go a step further and engage in biographical issue appeals to signal their competence in handling particular issues or they might want to show a credible commitment to working on an issue once in office. Despite finding that campaigns are often not just "cheap talk," Sulkin (2009) comments that there is a persistent narrative that candidates will say whatever it takes in order to get elected and then not follow through on those promises. One way in which candidates might try to avoid this accusation is by demonstrating their competence and commitment to work on a political issue. A key mechanism for demonstrating this is to emphasize how a candidate's biography ties directly to an issue position they hold, their ability to take action on the issue, and their commitment to that issue. For example, in 2022 Duncan Klussman ran as a Democratic candidate in Texas' 39th district and leaned heavily into his background as an educator. Klussman's campaign website's statement on education reads:

> "As a former teacher, school leader, and superintendent, I am committed to ensuring the United States has the best schools in the world. To improve our current education system, we must return decision-making to the individuals closest to the action; teachers and school leaders. We also must develop a system that values each individual and their interest in life after PreK-12 education. I have first-hand experience guiding a school system striving to accomplish such a goal." – Duncan Klussman campaign website

Klussman's campaign website then goes on to name specific education policies that he supports. In this campaign statement, Klussman attempts to demonstrate both his competence on and commitment to pursuing education policy reforms by explicitly linking his biography (his experience as an educator) to his position on education.

Overall, there are several reasons why candidates might be expected to engage in biographical issue appeals. However, despite evidence that discussing candidate biography is a commonly pursued strategy (Arbour and McGowen 2017), we know less about the extent to which candidates utilize biography on specific political issues and when. Answering these qustions is especially important in the context of increasing diversity in Congress and among congressional candidates. Congress has gotten more diverse in terms of race, gender, and

background experience. The number of Black, Hispanic, and Asian members of Congress has risen steadily over the past two decades and is currently at a record high. Similarly, the number of women in Congress has increased to an all-time high of 30%.[3] In addition to an increasing amount fo racial and gender diversity in Congress, the backgrounds of members of Congress have become more diversified as well. There is no longer one traditional path to electoral success, and a declining percent of newly elected members of Congress have previous electoral experience (Porter and Treul 2024). Similarly, there have been fewer members of Congress who come from traditional political backgrounds such as law or the military and increasing number who come from the fields of education, medicine, and business.[4] The increasing diversity of backgrounds for political candidates and office holders raises the question of how these candidates utilize their backgrounds to explain, justify, and highlight their positions on specific issues. We do not know the extent to which candidate characteristics such as gender, race, and political experience are associated with using biographical issue appeals as an issue messaging strategy, and this is especially important in the context of increasing diversity. There is also a lack of research relating to the electoral conditions under which candidates might be expected to pursue this strategy. In this paper, I examine the relationship between candidate characteristics and biographical issue appeals and electoral conditions and biographical issue appeals to evaluate which candidates leverage this strategy and under what circumstances.

While understanding who utilizes biographical issue appeals and under what electoral conditions is important in its own right, a key part of this question is examining the extent to which these biographical issue appeals are indeed signals of a credible commitment to work on an issue once in office. Sulkin (2009) suggests that, in order to evaluate the extent to which candidates follow through on their campaign promises, it is best to consider the political issues that candidates message on as a signal of a candidate's priorities if elected to office. In this sense, a candidate keeps a promise if once in Congress they work on

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[3]https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/02/07/the-changing-face-of-congress/
[4]https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Chpt-1.pdf

an issue that they messaged on while on the campaign trail. Furthermore, Sulkin (2009) also finds that campaign rhetoric often reveals candidates' sincerely held beliefs, and that candidates who express those beliefs on the campaign trail are more likely to work on them in office. Consistent with this finding, Ringquist and Dasse (2004) analyze roll call voting on environmental legislation and find that members of Congress do vote in a way that is consistent with their campaign messaging on the environment. Overall, previous scholarship suggests that candidates do tend to follow through on their campaign priorities and work on them once in office, despite what many voters may think.

While there has been some work as to whether the type of campaign appeal matters for legislative promisekeeping, this work has largely focused on how candidates message about their own and their opponent's position on an issue (Sulkin 2009). As discussed, a large part of why candidates use biographical issue appeals is to communicate their credibility on different political issues. If biographical issue appeals truly signal credible commitments beyond messaging broadly on an issue, voters can use them to make better-informed choices about which candidates will advance their interests in office. Conversely, if biographical issue appeals are primarily rhetorical tactics without follow-through, they risk undermining trust in politicians and electoral promises. Ultimately, understanding who engages in biographical issue appeals and whether these candidates follow through on these commitments once in office has important consequences for descriptive and substantive representation in Congress.

Theory

There are reasons to expect that both the electoral conditions of a race and the characteristics of a candidate are related to the likelihood a candidate utilizes biographical issue appeals. Beginning with electoral conditions, I expect that candidates running in competitive districts will be more likely to incorporate biographical issue appeals into their campaign communications. In competitive districts, candidates may not be able to rely only on co-

partisans to secure victory. Instead, they may have to rally support from independents and persuade voters from the opposing party to cast a ballot in their favor. To do this, candidates will want to enhance their likeability and demonstrate competence and commitment in order to persuade voters. Biographical issue appeals may be one strategy candidates use to accomplish exactly that. In the context of citizen-to-citizen persuasion, Naunov, Rueda-Canon and Ryan (2025) find that personal narrative communication is the most effective way to engage in meaningful persuasion. Following this, it is likely that candidates adopt this strategy as well. A candidate sharing about their own background can enhance their likeability, particularly among independents and outpartisans than an impersonal campaign message or one that attacks the platform of the opposite party. For example, a candidate may utilize a biographical issue appeal messaging on the topic of healthcare such as Kevin Abel, a Democratic candidate in Georgia's 6th district did in 2018:

> "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 that 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 on healthcare, Kevin Abel makes two references to his biography, one related to his background as a healthcare provider and a second revealing his status as a cancer survivor. In this statement, Abel is clearly trying to communicate to voters how he is relateable, committed to healthcare, and ultimately deserving of their vote. In contrast, an issue messaging strategy on healthcare that does not utilize a biographical issue appeal may be one such as the statement from Todd Allen, a Democratic candidate running in Texas' 24th district in 2018:

> "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 that it heals." – Todd Allen campaign website

In sharp contrast to the way in which Kevin Abel's messaging strategy on healthcare is one that communicates to voters "I'm like you, and I worry about healthcare costs too," Todd Allen's messaging strategy is one that directly attacks the Republican healthcare plan and the (Republican) incumbent representative in the district. In a competitive election, in which candidates will likely need the votes of independents or opposing partisans to succeed, it is likely that Abel's strategy alienates fewer voters and leaves voters with a more favorable impression of Abel. In competitive districts, candidates need to be wary of alienating potential voters and work to attract support from both sides of the aisle. Specifically, I expect that:

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

Furthermore, I also expect that candidate characteristics will be related to the likelihood that candidates engage in biographical issue appeals. First, I expect that high-quality candidates will be more likely to engage in biographical issue appeals. There are two traditional methods of determining whether a congressional candidate is high-quality: candidate experience and campaign finances (Jacobson 1989; Bond, Covington and Fleisher 1985). For decades, the primary criteria scholars used to declare candidates as high-quality is based on whether a candidate had previous political experience. However, recent work has shown that voters may be increasingly open to a broader range of background experiences for congressional candidates (Porter and Treul 2024). These fingings suggest that elected experience may no longer be the only appropriate way of identifying high-quality candidates. Instead, perhaps, candidate fundraising may also be a useful marker of whether a challenger candidate is a viable competitor. Scholars such as Maestas and Rugeley (2008) have demonstrated that candidates without prior political experience can still demonstrate their seriousness and viability as a challenger candidate through fundraising efforts. Furthermore, these political amateur candidates may even be more successful in securing campaign donations and, when

raising sufficient funds, winning primary elections than experienced challengers (Porter and Steelman 2023). In the United States, a candidate's ability to fundraise is critical to electoral success (Bonica 2017; Ferguson, Jorgenson and Chen 2022), and may increasingly be a more appropriate measure of estimateing whether a candidate is high-quality or not. High-quality candidates may differ from other (challenger) candidates in a number of ways. Two related differences may be the campaign resources of a candidate and the level of professionalization of a campaign. Candidates with more resources and more professional campaigns are more likely to have the ability to conduct pre-tests of their campaign messaging strategies and put forward the best and most persuasive campaign communications. This pre-testing process is highly expensive (Hewitt et al. 2024), and is likely not available to candidates without vast resources on hand and more professional campaign organizations. Given the literature in political behavior suggesting that engaging in personal appeals is a persuasive messaging strategy, I expect that candidates with the resources to devote significant time and money to crafting the strongest campaign messages will be more likely to utilize biographical issue appeals. Specifically, I hypothesize:

> *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.

In other words, I expect that high-quality candidates will be more likely to engage in biographical issue appeals. Consistent with the literature on candidate quality, I define high-quality candidates both in terms of resources and those with previous elected experience.

Relatedly, I also expect that incumbent candidates will engage in biographical issue appeals less than experienced challenger candidates. Scholars have found that incumbents and challengers differ on a number of dimensions, including their campaign strategies and rhetoric (Druckman, Kifer and Parkin 2009, 2020). Incumbents dedicate more time to both discussing their elected experience and their specific actions taken to promote constituents in the district, while challenger candidates dedicate more time to discussing competence as

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well as specific issue positions (Druckman, Kifer and Parkin 2009). All candidates want to signal their ability to function effectively as a legislator and pursue their desired policy goals. Candidates can demonstrate competence in a variety of ways, but none is as straightforward as engaging in credit claiming (Mayhew 1974). When incumbent candidates engage in credit claiming behavior, they are highlighting their legislative record and accomplishments as a sign of successfully performing the duties of a legislator. For non-incumbent candidates, who cannot rely on their record in Congress, they must demonstrate competence some other way, such as highlighting how their biography or resume prepare them well for the job. Given that challenger candidates and incumbents have different campaign strategies available to them, most notably credit claiming, I expect that politically experienced challenger candidates will be more likely to engage in biographical issue appeals in their campaign rhetoric. This leads me to hypothesize that:

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

Additionally, I also expect that candidate identities, such as race and gender, will be related to the likelihood that candidates engage in biographical issue appeals. There is a large body of literature examining both the electoral effects and campaign differences of various descriptive identities. In many cases, scholars find that leaning into these identities can actually present an opportunity for candidates to gain an electoral advantage. For example, female candidates campaign differently than their male counterparts both in campaign advertisements (Panagopoulos 2004) and when campaigning via social media (Evans and Clark 2016). However, these differences in campaigning may actually present an advantage to female candidates. Herrnson, Lay and Stokes (2003) find that female candidates gain a strategic advantage when they lean into their identity as a woman and campaign on issues for which voters are favorable predisposed towards women. This leads me to expect women will be more likely to engage in biographical issue appeals. Specifically, I hypothesize:

H4: Female candidates will be more likely to engage in biographical issue

appeals than their male counterparts.

Turning to race, however, there is mixed evidence on the extent to which Black candidates are likely to lean into their identity as a Black person. Scholars are in disagreement over whether, and the extent to which, Black candidates are penalized by white voters for their race (Juenke and Shah 2016; Tokeshi 2023). Some scholars suggest that minority candidates perform just as well as their white counterparts in congressional districts, while Tokeshi (2023) demonstrates that, at least when running for governor or the Senate, Black candidates typically underperform relatively speaking. Furthermore, Tokeshi (2023) also finds that Black candidates are disproportionately the target of campaign discourse on racially themed issues such as crime. There is also disagreement in the literature surrounding whether Black candidates lean into or shy away from their identity as a Black candidate overall (e.g. Citrin, Green and Sears 1990; McIlwain and Caliendo 2011). Overall, the relatively sparse and inconsistent literature leads me to expect that Black candidates will be less likely to engage in biographical issue appeals. Perhaps Black candidates will downplay their identity as a Black person to avoid prejudice from racially resentful voters or to decrease the likelihood of experiencing racialized attack ads. This leads me to hypothesize that:

> *H5*: Black candidates will be less likely to engage in biographical issue appeals
> in their campaign rhetoric than non-Black candidates.

Overall, I expect that electoral characteristics, such as the competitiveness of a district, and candidate characteristics, such as race, gender, and candidate quality, are related to the frequency with which candidates leverage biographical issue appeals in their campaign communication.

A critical component of studying biographical issue appeals is understanding whether these appeals are actually a credible signal for candidates' future legislative behavior. As electorally motivated individuals (Mayhew 1974), members of Congress may be incentivized to strategically message on their background in a way that is electorally beneficial (Case and

Treul 2024). Given voters have low knowledge of members' legislative activity, members of Congress are consistently able to strategically message and credit claim on their legislative activity in a way that may misrepresent their legislative successes (Grimmer, Westwood and Messing 2014). Given this, it could be the case that congressional candidates engage in biographical issue appeals for electoral purposes, with no intention of following through if eleted to office. On the other hand, there is other research suggesting that candidates and members of Congress do follow-through on their campaign promises. Sulkin (2009) finds that candidates do prioritize the issues that they campaign on once in office. Additionally, candidates arrive in Congress with a unique background and set of values and experiences that informs their behavior while in office (Burden 2007). Burden (2007) finds that the personal experiences and backgrounds of members of Congress influence not only the positions members of Congress take on issues, but also how they choose to allocate their time. Furthermore, there is a line of research relating to how the identities of a candidate relates to her legislative activity once in office. Reingold (2008) finds that female politicians are more likely to act for women or women's interests than their male counterparts Cowell-Meyes and Langbein (see also 2009), and racial minorities and veterans in Congress are more likely to work on behalf of constituents who share their identity characteristics (Lowande, Ritchie and Lauterbach 2019). Additionally, non-traditional identity characteristics can play a role in legislator activity; Crosson and Kaslovsky (2024) find that members of Congress who have local roots (are born in or near the district they represent) focus more of their attention on constituent work instead of policymaking or party building. Overall, the existing scholarship suggests that the identity and experiences of a legislator have important implications for their legislative priorities once in office as well as policy outcomes. Drawing on this work, I seek to expand the discussion of representation in Congress by evaluating the extent to which a candidate's biography, specifically those aspects which a candidate chooses to highlight on the campaign trail, is a credible signal of what that candidate will pursue if elected to office. Consistent with the work of Sulkin (2009) on legislative promisekeeping, I hypothesize that:

H6: Candidates who utilize a biographical issue appeal on an issue will be more active on that issue in office than candidates who do not use a biographical issue appeal.

Data

To test the hypotheses relating to which candidates engage in biographical issue appeals and personal narrative appeals, I conduct an analysis of campaign websites for congressional primary election candidates in the 2018, 2020, and 2022 election cycles (Porter, Case and Treul 2025). Given that I am interested in how candidates talk about issues, I utilize the text from the issues pages for each candidate.[5] In particular, campaign websites are an ideal medium through which candidates can inform voters of their positions and policy proposals for specific political issues. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of primary election candidates have a campaign website. From 2018-2022, over 87% of candidates had a campaign website. Given this, campaign websites are well-suited to use in the study of campaign rhetoric. Candidate campaign websites typically include both biography pages and issue pages through which candidates communicate their positions on specific issues. As I am focused on understanding how candidates intertwine biography with the issue positions they take, I focus on the issue statement pages of campaign websites. Of candidates who had a campaign website from 2018 to 2022, 85% of those candidates included an issue platform on their website (Porter, Case and Treul 2025).

Campaign websites can act as an "information hub" for a candidate's campaign (Herrnson, 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. After newspapers, campaign websites are the most trustworthy source that primary election voters would turn to when seeking out information about a candidate (Case, Sachleben and Treul 2025). Druckman, Kifer and Parkin (2018) find that campaign orga-

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[5]Specifically, this analysis includes primary election candidates who had a campaign website.

nizations see campaign websites as the best platform for capturing a candidate's overall message. 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 constistent 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 accesible 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, there were 4,506 candidates for the House of Representatives who ran in a primary election between 2018 and 2022 and who have a campaign website, and those candidates become the focus of my analysis. All together, these 4,506 candidates have a total of 43,465 individual issue statements.

In addition to assessing which candidates engage in biographical issue appeals and personal narrative appeals, I am particularly interested in evaluating whether these types of appeals are a signal of a credible commitment to working on that issue once in Congress. In other words, I am interested in whether biographical issue appeals are merely a campaigning tactic, or whether these types of appeals lead to more legislative promisekeeping than campaign appeals that do not draw on a candidate's biography. Following the work of Sulkin (2009), I focus on introductions and cosponsorship as a measure of legislative activity. Specifically, I focus on original cosponsorship as the primary measure of legisla-

tive activity. Although there can only be one sponsor of a bill, that bill can have multiple original cosponsors, or members who are listed as cosponsors on the the date that a bill is introduced. Original cosponsorship is a signal of substantive legislative activity, more so than cosponsorship at other stages of the legislative process (Curry and Roberts 2022). While cosponsors can be added and removed to a bill through the entire legislative process, an original cosponsor is a member of Congress who was a cosponsor of the bill at the time of its introduction to the House floor. According to interviews conducted by Curry and Roberts (2022), original cosponsorship is often a serious indicator of legislative collaboration, and original cosponsors are typically considered to be equal partners on that piece of legislation. In other words, each original cosponsor of a bill likely put substantial effort into drafting that piece of legislation, so original cosponsorship demonstrates a high-effort legislative activity that represents a strong signal of commitment. As such, I rely on original cosponsorship as a measure of legislator activity, and ultimately campaign promisekeeping. To collect data on original cosponsorship, I used Congress.gov's API to gather data on all bill introductions and cosponsorships in the House of Representatives for the 116th, 117th, and 118th Congress. The data from Congress.gov also lists whether a member of Congress was an original cosponsor on a given bill. Overall, I collected data on 143,914 original cosponsors from 34,607 bills introduced in the 116th-118th Congresses. I then use these data to evaluate campaign promisekeeping. Of course, not all of the 4,500 congressional candidates in my sample go on to win their electoral contests and gain a seat in the House of Representatives. As such, I can only evaluate the link between campaign appeals and legislative action for those candidates who won. Across 2018, 2020, and 2022, I have observations on the legislative activities for 1,306 candidates in my sample, so this becomes the basis of my analysis on biographical issue appeals and legislative promisekeeping.

Methods

Before evaluating which candidates engage in biographical issue appeals and personal narrative 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 issue appeal. The categories I use for defining biographical issue appeals are 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)

Using this as my coding scheme, I rely on a supervised machine learning classification pipeline. Specifically, the workflow for this process 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. 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 subsequent analyses. 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. This then allows me to assess which candidates engage in biographical issue appeals and under what conditions.

The second measurement task relates to the issue areas of campaign website statements and bills. 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 identify 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 analysis in the Congressional Research Service, and the policy area term chosen is the one that best describes the primary focus of each measure.[6] 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 coding scheme for linking policy areas to policy codes is presented in Table 2

Table 2: 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

Using Table 2 as a guideline, I can then evaluate (1) the extent to which candidates utilize biographical issue appeals on major policy areas and (2) whether those biographical issue appeals are related to more legislative action on that issue once in office.

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

Results

Before turning to the empirical models and testing my hypotheses, I will briefly present some descriptive statisics about the prevalence of biographical issue appeals within candidate issue statements. Overall, approximately 21% 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, 68% 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 below in Figure 1. When examing 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
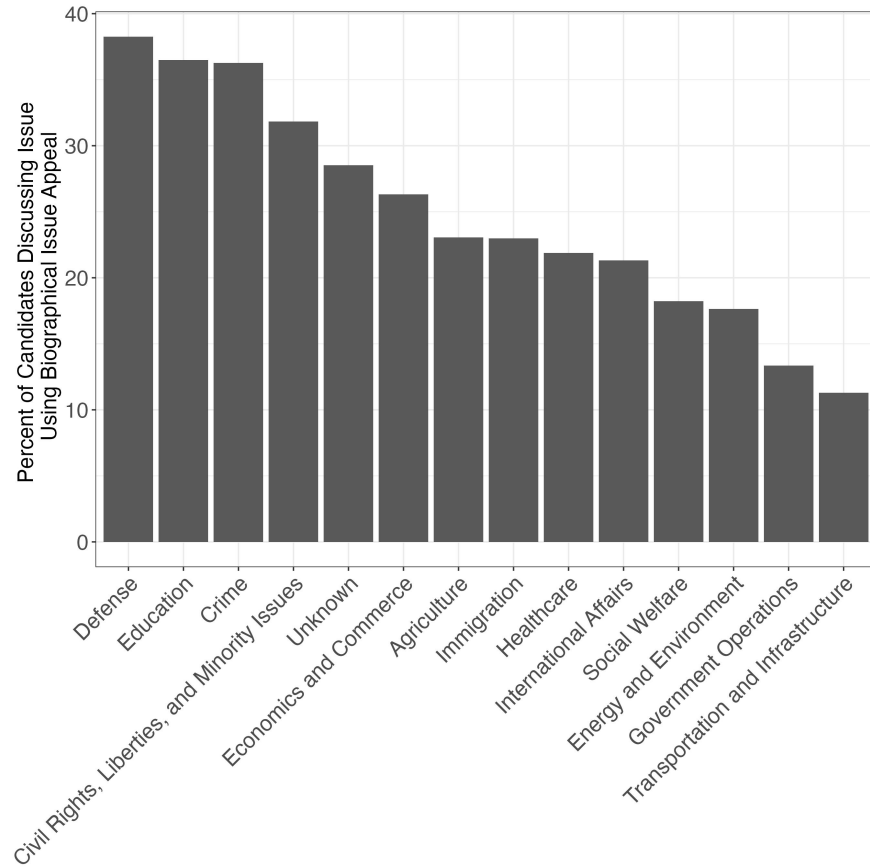
Biographical Issue Appeals

To test my hypotheses surrounding which candidates will engage in biographical issue appeals and under what electoral conditions, I run a logistic regression model in which the outcome variable is a binary variable for whether or a not a candidate engages in a biographical issue appeal on his/her campaign website. To code this variable, a candidate receives a value of 1 if any of their 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 classifed

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). To test H2 and H3, I utilize a factor variable to indicate whether a candidate is the incumbent legislator, a candidate with previous elected experience, or an inexperienced candidate. To test H2 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.

To test H4 about candidate gender, I include a binary variable for whether or not a candidate is female. Similarly to test H5 about Black candidates, I include a binary variable for whether a candidate is Black. In addition to the independent variables of interest, I also control for a number of other factors related to electoral conditions that may influence the likelihood a candidate engages in biographical issue appeals such as primary type and whether or not a primary is contested (features more than one candidate). To measure primary type, I classify each type of primary election into partisan versus non-partisan. Non-partisan primaries are primary elections in which Democratic and Republican candidates are competing together in the same field. These non-partisan primaries include states with top-two and top-four primaries as well as Lousiana, 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
Female	0.116
	(0.086)
Black	−0.461***
	(0.114)
Experienced Candidate Ref: Incumbent	0.289*
	(0.154)
Inexperienced Candidate Ref: Incumbent	−0.338***
	(0.123)
Republican	−0.128
	(0.078)
Partisan Primary	0.058
	(0.111)
Competitive District	0.276***
	(0.088)
Fundraising	0.075***
	(0.008)
Contested Primary	−0.162
	(0.103)
Constant	0.406**
	(0.197)
Year Fixed Effects	✓
Observations	4,502
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The results from this model indicate support for many of my hypotheses. In support of H1 relating to candidates in competitive districts, 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<0.01). 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 relating to high-quality candidates, 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<.05). 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. My hypotheses relating to candidate characteristics such as gender and race receive mixed support. In contrast to my expectation that female candidates are more likely to engage in biographical issue appeals, there is no significant difference in how frequently men and women candidates use biographical issue appeals. On the other hand, H5 relating to black candidates does receive support, and Black candidates are nearly 10 percentage points less likely to utilize biographical issue appeals than non-Black candidates (p<.01). Overall, the results of this model provide evidence suggesting that both candidate characteristics and electoral conditions shape the likelihood that candidates engage in biographical issue appeals in their campaign communications.

Legislative Follow-Through

Demonstrating which candidates use biographical issue appeals is an important step forward in understanding how candidates campaign. However, it is equally important to evaluate the link between these campaign promises and legislative action in office. To do this, I must rely on those candidates in my sample who won their electoral contests and therefore participated in the subsequent Congress. This restricts the number of candidates from over 4,500 primary election candidates to just over 1,300 candidates who won a seat in the House of Representatives between 2018-2022 and served in the 116th, 117th, or 118th Congresses. Using these candidates, I model the relationship between campaign appeals and legislative activity. 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-year 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 level of bill introductions and cosponsorships that each policy area has. In addition to policy area fixed effects, I also include member-year 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-year 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-year-policy area, are presented in Table 4.

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

	Dependent variable:
	Original Cosponsorships
Campaign Statement	0.297***
	(0.016)
Biographical Appeal	0.097***
	(0.019)
Constant	−0.285
	(0.263)
Member-Year Fixed Effects	✓
Policy Area Fixed Effects	✓
Observations	14,716

Note:	*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Beginning with the campaign statements 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 an issue 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 controling for policy area and the specific qualities and characteristics 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 increased 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. This suggests that biographical issue appeals are indeed a signal of credible commitment, and that a candidate is likely to work to follow through on those issues once in office.

Conclusion

Overall, the results of these analyses demonstrate that biographical issue appeals are a highly prevalent issue messaging strategy in campaign communications. Well over half of all candidates explicitly link their biography to the positions that they hold on particular issues. Furthermore, the likelihood that a candidate engages in biographical issue appeals is related to both the characteristics of that candidate, such as race and political experience, as well as the electoral conditions a candidate is competing under. Inexperienced candidates and black candidates are less likely to engage in biographical appeals, high-quality candidates with political experience and strong fundraisers are more likely to do so. Candidates running in competitive districts are also more likely to engage in these biographical issue appeals than candidates running in districts that are considered safe for either party.

There are multiple reasons why candidates would engage in a biographical issue appeal. Candidates may seek to signal competence, a credible commitment to an issue, or to relate to voters by demonstrating "I am one of you" (Fenno 1978). While more work needs to be done to evaluate voters' response to biographical issue appeals, existing literature suggests that these types of appeals may be a particularly strong rhetorical strategy that candidates can adopt (e.g. Kubin et al. 2021). If this is the case that biographical issue

appeals demonstrate competence and commitment, enhance likeability, and reduce animus, it raises the question of why not all candidates would leverage biographical issue appeals in their campaign communications. While over half of all candidates incorporate at least one biographical issue appeal on their campaign website, a sizeable portion do not. I expect that there are two main reasons for this. First, consistent with my hypothesis about high-quality candidates, I expect that not all candidates will understand that this is an effective messaging strategy and then choose to employ it. Candidates who do not have strong campaign infrastructure or an ability to pre-test messages may not be able to put forward the most persuasive messages. Furthermore, a subset of candidates who run for Congress, particularly in a primary election, are simply not viable candidates. These candidates do not raise any money, do not have previous political experience, and cannot be considered "serious" challengers (e.g. Maestas et al. 2006). As demonstrated through the results presented above, these types of candidates, poor fundraisers and those without previous political experience, are the least likely to engage in biographical issue appeals.

Candidates may also strategically choose to reveal information about their biography and the extent to which they lean into that biographical information on the campaign trail because they are cognizant of how biographical information may act as heuristics that convey information beyond what the candidate chooses to reveal. Existing literature suggests that information such as gender, race, and social class may carry additional ideological perceptions in the minds of voters. Specifically, women and black candidates are perceived as more liberal than white males (McDermott 1998) and candidates from working class backgrounds are also perceived as more liberal than other candidates (Carnes and Sadin 2015). Additionally, candidate occuptions also influence voters' perceptions of candidates, including ideology and competence (Kirkland and Coppock 2017). As Kirkland and Coppock (2017) demonstrate, both Democrats and Republicans perceive small business owners as more likely to implement conservative policies, and Republicans view educators as less competent. Given this, it may be the case that candidates do not want to lean too heavily on the background experience

in recognition of the other unintentional information that biographical information may be communicating. If this is the case, certain candidates may refrain from using biographical issue appeals in certain electoral contexts, although more research is needed to investigate this claim.

Finally, I find that biographical issue appeals are indeed a credible signal of future legislative commitment. Consistent with the findings of Sulkin (2009, 2011), members of Congress are more likely to engage in meaningful legislative activity on issues that they discuss in their campaign website than issues they do not. Biographical issue appeals are also a strong signal of legislative commitment. Members who engage in biographical issue appeals on the campaign trail are significantly more likely to work on those issus once in office than issues for which they do not utilize a biographical issue appeal. The finding that members of Congress follow through on their biographical issue appeals has important implications for substantive representation in Congress. These results demonstrate that campaigns are more than cheap talk, and that candidates signal their biography on the issues they plan to prioritize once in office. This underscores the broader implications of biographical issue appeals for democratic accountability and representation. If voters take these appeals into account when making electoral decisions, they may be able to better predict the legislative priorities of their representatives, ultimately strengthening the connection between campaign rhetoric and governance.

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