

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 policy 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 US 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 on issues for which they do not incorporate their biography into their campaign communications. I also explore personal narrative appeals, a subset of biographical issue appeals, assessing their prevalence and potential as a particularly strong signal of legislative priorities.

Introduction

In 2022, Marie Gluskamp 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. Gluskamp Perez campaigned heavily on her own experience running an auto repair shop with her husband, and connected with voters by telling her story. Gluskamp 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 Gluskamp Perez, WA-03

Once in Congress, the fifth bill Gluskamp 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.

In his seminal work *Home Style*, Fenno (1978) suggested in order to achieve the proximate goal of reelection, members of Congress develop a home style as a way to connect with their constituents. The goal of any home style is for voters to believe “I am one of you.” For first-time candidates aspiring to Congress, this goal of reelection shifts to winning an initial election. Regardless of candidate type, Fenno (1978) highlights that members of Congress, and by extension candidates, do indeed have policy driven motivations and care about achieving desired outcomes related to their policy priorities – they just have to be in office to achieve these policy goals. Sulkin (2009, 2011) builds on this idea in her research

on legislative promisekeeping, where she finds that campaigns are more than just “cheap talk.” She finds candidates who campaign on specific policy issues are more likely to follow through on them once in office (Sulkin 2011). While some of this is due to strategic considerations, such as electoral competition, these findings demonstrate that, at least at some level, candidates run for Congress because they are genuinely passionate about solving policy problems, and then, if elected, devote time to these issues once in office.

Of course, before getting elected to office and pursuing policy goals, a candidate must first run a successful campaign. 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 and to preview a candidate’s policy goals. The campaigns that are most effective are those that appeal to a majority of voters preferences for candidate backgrounds and issue positions. When campaigning, candidates frequently talk about both their own biography and about their positions on political issues. When it comes to biography, candidates often highlight occupational backgrounds that would serve them well once in office such as previous elected experience (Jacobson 1989; Jacobson and Kernell 1983). While once considered the hallmark of a successful congressional candidate, more recent work demonstrates that voters may be open to a broader variety of backgrounds (Jacobson 2015; Porter, Treul and McDonald 2024), and that at least in the Republican Party, candidates may actually downplay their previous elected experience (Case and Treul 2024). While previous work has highlighted how candidates are strategic in how they present their biography (Case and Treul 2024; McDonald, Porter and Treul 2020; Arbour and McGowen 2017), there has been less research about the way in which candidates leverage biographical information specifically as it relates to their issue positions. This paper examines biographical issue appeals, or when candidates use their background and personal experiences to justify their position on

a political issues.

How candidates communicate on issues is highly important because the issue positions that candidates take are highly salient to many voters, particularly in primary elections in which voters cannot simply rely on party identification to inform their vote choice. Converse (1964) defined the term “issue public” as a group of citizens who care especially strongly about a particular issue and Ryan and Ehlinger (2023) find that more than half of Americans can be considered to belong to an issue public of some sort. Given the clear importance of issues to many voters, the choices candidates make in communicating their positions on these issues affect their ability to persuade potential voters and ultimately to run a successful campaign. In their quest to get elected, candidates can persuade voters both by demonstrating their competence in dealing with pressing policy issues and by signaling a credible commitment to address those issues once in office. One way candidates can do this is by weaving their biography together with their issue positions and using their personal experience to both justify those positions – what I describe as engaging in a biographical issue appeal.

While there is some evidence suggesting that candidates regularly communicate on biography and issue positions in the same advertisements (Arbour and McGowen 2017), less is known about the specific ways in which candidates leverage their biography to justify their position on an issue. Additionally, we do not know which candidates are more likely to engage in biographical issue appeals or the electoral circumstances that elicit this behavior. This paper examines the ways candidates send credible signals on the campaign trail by looking at who engages in biographical issue appeals. Further, we also do not know the extent to which candidates who engage in biographical issue appeals follow through on those commitments once in office. Is employing these appeals on the campaign trail simply a tactic candidates use to appear relateable and drum up support from voters or are biographical issue appeals a credible signal of a candidate’s commitment to take action on a policy area once in office? In the second part of this paper, I test whether these biographical issue

appeals are indeed a more credible commitment to work on issues in Congress.

Furthermore, I also examine different types of personal issue appeals to determine if certain types send stronger signals of issue commitment. Do candidates simply make a passing reference to a line on a resume, or do they go deeper and share heartfelt stories linking their lived experience to their policy positions? Do these different types of appeals lead to the same legislative behavior or does one signal a more credible commitment of legislative priorities? I hypothesize that candidates who engage in biographical issue appeals are more likely to follow through on those issues once in office than candidates who make generic issue statements, and that this is particularly true among candidates who engage in personal narrative appeals about their experience on a policy issue. I also hypothesize that candidates in competitive districts are more likely to use biographical issue appeals than candidates in safe districts to signal competence, commitment, and relatability. Ultimately, understanding who engages in biographical issue appeals and whether these candidates follow through on these commitments once in office has important consequences for both descriptive and substantive representation.

Campaigns and Issue Messaging

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 the 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.

One messaging strategy that has received much attention is using “positive” versus “negative” appeals. In a positive appeal, a candidate chooses to emphasize her own merits such as her personal strengths, policy proposals, or past accomplishments (Lau and Rovner 2009). In contrast, a negative appeal focuses on highlighting the weaknesses of an opponent or “any criticism leveled by one candidate against another” over the course of a campaign (Geer 2008). Despite ambiguous evidence of the effectiveness of “going negative” as a campaign strategy (Lau et al. 1999; Lau, Sigelman and Rovner 2007; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994), it remains a popular strategy employed by candidates in congressional campaigns (Druckman et al. 2010).

Another messaging strategy that campaigns can adopt is persuasion through source cues. Specifically, the source of the message that a campaign is touting can have implications for its persuasiveness. Existing scholarship finds variations in the persuasiveness of the partisanship (Zaller 1992), gender (Searles, Spencer and Duru 2020), and expertise (Iyengar and Valentino 2000) of campaign messengers, such as testimonials in a campaign advertisement. The mechanism through which source cue persuasion operates is that message source can often function as a group cue that can reveal something about how the candidate feels towards a particular in-group. For example, if the campaign messenger that a candidate chooses to employ shares an in-group with the receiver, then it can be a signal to that receiver how the candidate feels toward the in-group. One constraint on this messaging strategy is that it is relatively limited in its scope because it is primarily relevant for television advertisements rather than other forms of campaign communication such as campaign websites.

A third messaging strategy that candidates can employ is engaging the emotions of their potential voters. Existing scholarship suggests that campaign messaging primarily persuades voters by appealing to their hearts (emotions) rather than their minds (facts) (Brader 2006). Furthermore, there are differential effects depending on which emotions campaign messages evoke. Brader (2005) finds that advertisements that stimulate enthusiasm are more successful

in boosting political participation whereas ads that invoke fear are more likely to affect vote choice. Similarly, Albertson, Dun and Gadarian (2020) outline how ads stimulating different emotions such as enthusiasm, anxiety, and hatred, exercise a unique role in affecting vote choice and political engagement more generally.

The previously mentioned strategies are just a couple of the more popular messaging strategies that candidates can employ in their campaign communications. To choose an issue messaging strategy, many well-funded campaigns conduct experiments to settle on the most persuasive ads. Hewitt et al. (2024) conduct a meta analysis of 146 campaign advertising experiments from 2018-2020 and find that there are small, but meaningful, differences in the persuasive effects of different campaign advertisements. However, there is much heterogeneity in the rhetorical strategies that are most persuasive, and what is most persuasive is highly context dependent (Hewitt et al. 2024). Throughout their period of analysis, the authors did not find that any single messaging strategy (positive/negative, source, emotions) was consistently persuasive across election cycles or race (i.e. presidential versus downballot) (Hewitt et al. 2024). In other words, there was no real pattern to the specific features and rhetorical strategies of advertisements that proved to be persuasive.

One messaging strategy that is understudied within the context of congressional campaigns is personal appeals as a persuasive messaging technique. This is somewhat surprising considering the multitude of literature in the field of political psychology suggesting that personal appeals are a particularly effective form of persuasion (Kalla and Broockman 2020; Kubin et al. 2021). Furthermore, general biographical appeals are a relatively prevalent campaign strategy, with nearly one-third of congressional candidates that aired television advertisements utilizing a biographical appeal at least once (Arbour and McGowen 2017). Additionally, over 85% of all primary election candidates include a biography page 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). There are a variety of reasons why candidates might be motivated to utilize biographical appeals

throughout their campaign. Candidates might want to share more information about their background in order to appear more likeable and relateable to a broad range of voters. Returning to Fenno (1978), congressional candidates might engage in biographical 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 strat-

egy (Arbour and McGowen 2017), we know less about the extent to which candidates utilize biography on specific political issues and when. Furthermore, 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. 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.

Candidates and Biographical Issue Appeals

Beginning with the characteristics of candidates who utilize biographical issue appeals, I expect that incumbent candidates will engage in biographical issue appeals less than non-incumbent 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 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 non-incumbent candidates will be more likely to engage in biographical issue appeals in their campaign rhetoric. This leads me to hypothesize that:

H1: Non-incumbent candidates are more likely to utilize biographical issue appeals in their campaign rhetoric than incumbent candidates.

Relatedly, I also 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 are increasingly open to a broader range of background experiences for congressional candidates (Porter and Treul 2024). These findings 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, the ability to fundraise is critical to electoral success (Bonica 2017; Ferguson, Jorgenson and Chen 2022). Campaign finance is such an important feature of the electoral arena that scholars such as Thomsen (2023) have demonstrated that beyond just measuring candidates through fundraising ability, it may even be appropriate to measure the overall conditions of an election, such as its competitiveness, through campaign finance rather than vote totals.

Overall, a candidate's ability to fundraise may increasingly be a more appropriate measure

of estimating whether a candidate is high-quality or not. High-quality challengers 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 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 challenger quality, I define high-quality candidates both in terms of resources and those with previous elected experience.

In addition to the qualities of a candidate being predictive of whether they will engage in biographical issue appeals, I also expect the conditions of an electoral contest to be related to the frequency with which candidates utilize these appeals. Specifically, 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 copartisans 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. A candidate sharing about their own background enhances 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 than 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.¹ In competitive districts, candidates need to be wary of alienating potential voters. Perhaps in an attempt to attract support from both sides of the aisle, I expect that:

H3: Candidates in competitive electoral districts are more likely to engage in biographical issue appeals in their campaign rhetoric than candidates in safe districts.

Campaigns and Legislative Behavior

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 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. 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). I examine

¹As a related project, I plan to use survey experiments to evaluate the effects that these types of biographical issue appeals have on voters.

whether biographical issue appeals present a stronger signal of commitment to working on an issue than candidates who discuss that issue without signaling how their biography sets them up well to work on that issue if elected to office. Understanding whether biographical issue appeals are merely a campaign tactic or if they are indeed a stronger signal of legislative priorities once in office has important implications for the study of substantive representation.

Existing scholarship has demonstrated the link between descriptive and substantive representation. Reingold (2008) finds that female politicians are more likely to act for women or women’s interests than their male counterparts in the policy arena Cowell-Meyers and Langbein (see also 2009). In addition to the link between descriptive and substantive representation for female politicians, research also suggests that 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 concepts of descriptive representation also present compelling evidence of the link between descriptive and substantive representation. For example, 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:

H4: Candidates who utilize a biographical issue appeal on an issue will be more active on that issue in office than candidates who discuss the same issue without using a biographical issue appeal.

Personal Narrative Appeals

I expect that candidate characteristics and electoral conditions will be related to the likelihood that candidates adopt biographical issue appeals in their campaign rhetoric. However, there is not one singular way in which candidates can deliver these appeals. Specifically, candidates can vary in the level of detail they reveal about their background experiences. Candidates could make a passing reference to being a mother, or candidates could tell a story about their background and experiences, and then link those experiences back to their position on an issue and why they are qualified to tackle that issue if elected to office. In other words, candidates could engage in a biographical issue appeal that functions more as a heuristic cue for voters (such as being a mother, a veteran, or a teacher), or candidates could engage in a biographical issue appeal through storytelling, or a personal narrative appeal. A personal narrative appeal is a subcategory of biographical issue appeals in which the candidate communicates the link between their biography and their issue positions through storytelling. An example provides some clarity regarding the distinction between the two types of biographical issue appeals. First, one example of a biographical issue appeal that is not a narrative appeal is from Aruna Miller, a Democratic candidate from Maryland's 6th district in 2018. Miller's campaign website statement on Women's Issues reads:

"I want my three daughters to have every possible opportunity to succeed in America. Yet, despite advances, progress remains slow. I want to break down the barriers that restrain progress. I want my daughters and all women to be able to soar."
– Aruna Miller's campaign website

In this statement, Aruna Miller makes a passing reference to her status as a mother, and suggests that being a parent informs the position she takes on women's issues. A candidate may also go a step beyond a biographical issue appeal such as the one Aruna Miller uses and explicitly engage in storytelling about their biography and issue positions. Vangie Williams, a Democratic candidate for Virginia's 5th district, uses a personal narrative appeal about women's issues on her campaign website:

“It’s utterly appalling to me that in 2018 we’re still talking about Civil Rights. But, as a woman of color I know it’s absolutely necessary. For decades, I have often been the only woman in the boardroom, and certainly the only woman of color. As recently as 2008 I was called little girl in a meeting by a sitting U.S. Senator. Imagine his surprise when he found out I was the project manager for the Department of Defense! Whether it is LGBTQ rights, civil rights, voting rights, gender equality or religious freedom, the idea that at this point in our nation’s history we are fighting for the equality of ANY group is unfathomable to me... – Vangie Williams campaign website

Vangie Williams then goes on to highlight specific policy proposals that she supports. In this instance, Vangie Williams is engaging in a personal narrative appeal because she draws the reader in by telling a brief story of her own experience facing discrimination and linking that experience to her policy positions. While both of the above statements are examples of candidates engaging in biographical issue appeals, the statement from Vangie Williams goes a step further in attempting to persuade voters and, perhaps, in demonstrating a credible commitment to work on women’s issues if elected to office. Overall, there has been little research dedicated to the role of storytelling in politics, however there is reason to expect that candidates would engage in personal narrative appeals in their quest to persuade voters.

Scholars in political science have previously documented that, while it is difficult to engage in meaningful persuasion, people are most susceptible to persuasion when it takes the form of personal appeals (Kalla and Broockman 2020; Naunov, Rueda-Canon and Ryan 2025; Kubin et al. 2021). While these studies have focused on citizen-to-citizen persuasion, it is reasonable to expect that congressional candidates will also use this type of issue messaging in their campaign rhetoric. Outside of political science, literature from the fields of psychology and communication demonstrates that narratives have a particularly strong capacity to persuade people. There is a multitude of literature suggesting the persuasive power of the narrative form. First, the Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model (E-ELM) suggests that people are particularly susceptible to persuasion through the narrative form because that form facilitates the processes of *absorption* and *transportation* (Slater and Rouner 2002). Absorption can be considered the reading vicariously experiencing the characters’ (in

this case the candidates’) emotions and personality, whereas identification takes that notion a step further such that an individual perceives the characters (candidates) as similar to a person they might know (Slater and Rouner 2002). In other words, when invoked as a persuasive technique, narrative appeals are particularly effective because they can “transport” the reader into the story (Green and Brock 2000). These personal narratives are an effective rhetorical strategy because people perceive personal stories as less manipulative, and people are less likely to doubt or argue against messages that convey a personal experience (Green and Brock 2000). Furthermore, Moyer-Guse (2008) suggests that narrative communication may actually be a more effective way to influence attitudes than more traditional persuasive messages by stirring up less resistance to the persuasive messages contained within the narrative structure. Additionally, Bullock, Shulman and Huskey (2021) find that narratives are persuasive because they are easy to understand, and when a person is not expending effort processing the information, they are more susceptible to persuasion. Finally, a meta-analysis of narrative studies in communication research finds that a single narrative message has larger immediate and durable impacts than non-narrative communication (Oschatz and Marker 2020). Taken together, existing literature suggests that personal narratives are a highly effective form of persuasion.

As such, I expect that candidates for Congress will engage in personal narrative appeals. Specifically, I expect that a subset of candidates who engage in biographical issue appeals will go a step further and utilize a personal narrative appeal. Given that this topic is understudied in the context of political science, I examine which candidates are more likely to engage in personal narrative appeals and whether these appeals are a stronger signal of commitment to working on an issue once in office, especially relative to a non-narrative biographical issue appeal. More so than electoral conditions, I expect that the descriptive identities of candidates, such as race and gender, as well as candidate experience will be related to the likelihood of a candidate engaging in a personal narrative appeal. 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 that when women engage in biographical issue appeals, they will be more likely to do so in the personal narrative style. Specifically, I hypothesize:

H5: Female candidates will be more likely to engage in biographical issue appeals than their male counterparts. Of candidates engaging in biographical issue appeals in their campaign rhetoric, female candidates will be more likely to utilize a personal narrative appeal than male candidates.

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 and, when doing so, less likely to do so in the narrative form. 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:

H6: Black candidates will be less likely to engage in biographical issue appeals in their campaign rhetoric than non-Black candidates. Of candidates who utilize a biographical issue appeal, Black candidates will be less likely to do so as a personal narrative appeal than non-Black candidates.

Furthermore, I expect that professional background will be related to the likelihood that a candidate uses a personal narrative when engaging in a biographical issue appeal. Specifically, I expect that inexperienced challengers will be more likely to utilize a biographical issue appeal in a personal narrative style compared to candidates that have political experience. Jacobson (1989) documents how experienced challengers are more strategic campaigners than inexperienced challengers. However, this does not mean that inexperienced candidates are always poor campaigners or unviable candidates (Maestas and Rugeley 2008). Given this, it is likely that at least a subset of inexperienced candidates will engage in biographical issue appeals in their campaign rhetoric. If inexperienced candidates are wise enough to utilize a biographical issue appeal, I expect that they will be more likely to do so in a personal narrative format than incumbent candidates or those with previous elected experience. Incumbents and experienced candidates can pair biographical issue appeals with their record on issues, thereby simultaneously engaging in biographical issue appeals and credit claiming. Inexperienced candidates, however, cannot rely on both these strategies and must therefore lean more heavily on their own story. In other words, without a record to campaign on, all an inexperienced candidate has to run on is their story. This leads me to expect that:

H7: Of candidates who engage in a biographical issue appeal in their campaign rhetoric, inexperienced candidates will be more likely to utilize a personal narrative appeal than experienced candidates or incumbents.

Lastly, consistent with H4, I expect that candidates who engage in a personal narrative appeal on an issue will also be more legislatively active on that issue if elected to office. Much

in the way that a biographical issue appeal can signal competence and a credible commitment to an issue, I expect that a personal narrative appeal will be a particularly strong signal of commitment to work on an issue once in office. Overall, understanding who engages in biographical issue appeals, and personal narrative appeals in particular, and whether those appeals are a strong signal of commitment to work on an issue once in Congress or merely a campaign tactic has important consequences for representation in Congress.

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.² Specifically, the data for this project comes from Porter, Case and Treul (2025) and I utilize the text from the issues pages for each candidate. 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). Specifically, 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 (Her-

²Specifically, this analysis includes primary election candidates who had a campaign website.

rnsen, 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 organizations 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 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 and personal narrative appeals. It is for these reasons that I focus on candidate campaign websites when analyzing when and how candidates engage in biographical issue appeals and personal narrative 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 a measure of legislative 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 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). 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. 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 can 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.

Measurement

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. Beginning with biographical appeals, I largely rely on the categories laid out in Arbour and McGowen (2017), which identify several aspects of a candidate’s biography, for what constitutes a biographical issue appeal. The categories used by the authors are presented in Table 1. In addition to the categories used by the authors, I also added a category for “resume” to account for other aspects of a candidate’s background not captured by these categories (e.g. being a doctor or a teacher) as well as a catch-all “other” category that accounts for candidates sharing aspects of their biography or identity not captured by these categories (e.g. being a gun owner).

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
Charity	Candidate references charitable work they have taken part in
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

Table 1: Biographical Appeal Categories from Arbour and McGowen (2017)

Using this as my coding scheme, I hand labeled a random sample of 5,429 candidate issue statements and determine whether a candidate engaged in a biographical issue appeal in that particular issue statement. I labeled each issue statement as a binary of whether a

candidate engaged in a biographical issue appeal or not.³ As mentioned, the data from Porter, Case and Treul (2025) contain 43,495 issue statements from over 4,500 congressional candidates. As such, it is not feasible to indentify these biographical issue appeals entirely by hand. I take advantage of recent advancements in machine learning to classify candidate issue statements as being biographical issue appeals or not. Specifically, I use OpenAI’s text embeddings to generate embeddings for each individual issue statement. Embeddings are a numerical representation of text in a high dimensional space. This vectorized representation captures the overall context and semantic meaning of issue each statement, including the nuanced lanugage candidates use to engage in a biographical issue appeal. I then use these issue statement embeddings in a series of machine learning models to predict whether an issue statement is a biographical appeal or not.

Specifically, the workflow for this process is as follows. I first divide my hand labeled data into a training set and a validation set. Of the 5,429 issue statements I hand labeled, I use 4,725 statements (85%) as training data and 704 statements (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 using a transformer architecture. This 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 statements in my training data as the input for training five different machine learning models to predict whether a statement 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 seach. Using the best parameters for each model, I then combine the predictions from five models to train a logistic regression

³I have not yet classified biographical issue appeals according to the categories laid out in Table 1, but I hope to do so and present descriptive statistics on what these biographical issue appeals look like.

meta classifier that optimizes across all five models. For each of the five base models and the stacking classifier, I make out-of-sample predictions for all unlabeled issue statements as well as the 704 issue statements that were held out as a validation set. The performance from the six models (five base and one ensemble) are presented in Table 2, which presents several validation metrics for each model on the classification of the target class, biographical issue appeals. The accuracy score reflects the weighted accuracy of the each model’s overall performance.⁴

Table 2: Out-of-Sample Validation Metrics of Biographical Issue Appeals Classification

	Accuracy	Precision	Recall	F1
SVM	0.882	0.762	0.633	0.691
Random Forest	0.813	0.895	0.116	0.205
Gradient Boost	0.852	0.747	0.442	0.556
Ridge	0.876	0.731	0.646	0.686
Lasso	0.878	0.733	0.653	0.691
Stacking	0.882	0.767	0.626	0.689

The output generated from the stacking classifier is binary variable indicating whether or not an issue statement is a biographical issue appeal. Given the performance of the various models, I specifically use the outputs generated from the SVM model for the subsequent analyses. The binary variable generated by the SVM model then becomes the key dependent variable in my analysis of which candidates engage in biographical issue appeals and under what electoral conditions.

Within the issue statements classified as biographical issue appeals, I must also classify which of these biographical issue appeals fall within the personal narrative appeal subset. To accomplish this, I leverage recent advancements in large language models, such as OpenAI’s GPT-4, that allow for efficient classification of political texts. Large language models

⁴As demonstrated in Table 2, the model performance leaves room for improvement because the F1 score of the stacking classifier is 0.689, which is below the targeted standard of 0.8. As one solution, I am planning on subsetting statements down to the paragraph level because I am optimistic this will allow the machine learning models to pick up on often short, subtle biographical references. Given that the precision score is consistently higher than the recall score, this suggests that the models are under-classifying these biographical issue appeals. I expect that with embeddings representing shorter texts, the models may perform better. I am also very interested in other ideas and solutions that could help improve model performance.

are designed to predict the next token(s) in a sequence of text, such as a candidate issue statement. Given an input sequence, the model generates the most likely next word or set of words. Social science researchers have utilized this predictive capability to develop various text-as-data applications (e.g. Ornstein, Blasingame and Truscott 2025). Specifically, I use the `promptr` package in R, developed by Ornstein, Blasingame and Truscott (2025) to label candidate issue statements using the GPT-4 model from OpenAI’s API. There are a variety of LLMs that are well-suited for a task such as this. However, as Bosley (2024) demonstrates, the GPT-4 model performs particularly well compared to others when provided with very few (or no) examples. There is a vast array of literature offering (often competing) definitions of what constitutes the elements of a narrative. While the literature disagrees about the specific terminology describing these elements, there is general agreement about conceptually what makes up a narrative: theme, plot, characters, and conflict. Herman (2011) has synthesized the field of narrative literature together and proposes a framework in which there are four elements that comprise a narrative: (i) situatedness, (ii) event sequencing, (iii) world making/world disruption, and (iv) what it’s like. With this definition in mind, I provide GPT-4 with the following prompt for the personal narrative appeal classification task:

You will be provided with an issue statement from a candidate running for the U.S. Congress. Please classify these statements as personal narrative issue appeals or not. A personal narrative issue appeal is a rhetorical device used to persuade voters through storytelling, drawing on lived experience to articulate a clear justification for a candidate’s position on an issue. The personal experience can be either the candidate his/herself, a family member, a member of the candidate’s inner circle/friends, a professional relationship, or a community member. There are four elements of a narrative. These elements are (i) situatedness, ii) event sequencing, iii) worldmaking/world disruption, and (iv) what it’s like. These elements must all be met in order for a candidate’s statement to be classified as a personal narrative appeal. Respond **only** with yes or no. – Prompt for GPT-4 narrative classification

The output from this machine learning algorithm provided a yes/no for whether each individual issue statement was a personal narrative appeal. In order to check the robustness the classifications from GPT-4, I evaluated the model’s classification against my own hand

labeling of a sample of 3,000 issue statements that I had labeled prior to running the GPT-4 classification. For this task, the F1 score between GPT-4 and my hand-labeled coding is 0.63 and the Cohen's kappa 0.61. While this still indicates moderate to substantial agreement, the F1 score is lower than the targeted standard.⁵ Like with the biographical issue appeals outputs from the SVM machine learning model, I will use the classification of issue statements as personal narrative appeals, as key variables in my subsequent analyses of who engages in these appeals and whether they lead to legislative action.

The final measurement task I must accomplish 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 data from Porter, Case and Treul (2025) link candidate issue statements on campaign websites to 13 policy codes and the bills coding from CRS links bills to 32 major topic areas.

⁵I have tried various prompts and different numbers of provided examples, consistent with Bosley (2024), and this is the classification that has performed the best. Given the slight underperformance of the model, coupled with concerns about reproducibility of probabilistic GPT labeling (Barrie, Palmer and Spirling 2024), I am currently working on building out a machine learning pipeline for classifying these appeals that alleviates some of these concerns. Specifically, once I have the workflow for classifying biographical issue appeals performing well, I plan to leverage that workflow for the classification of personal narrative appeals as well. Alternatively, I plan to use chain-of-thought prompting to improve the performance of personal narrative appeal classification with LLMs.

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

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 Porter, Case and Treul (2025) 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 3

Major Topic Area	CRS 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

Table 3: Mapping Policy Codes Porter, Case and Treul (2025) to CRS Policy Areas

Using Table 3 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.

Descriptive Statistics

Before turning to the empirical models and testing my hypothesis, I will briefly present some descriptive statistics about the prevalence of biographical issue appeals within candidate issue statements. Overall, approximately 15% of all issue statements were classified

as biographical issue appeals. However, when aggregating the data from the statement-candidate-year level to the candidate-year level, 61% of all candidates engage in at least one biographical issue appeal on their campaign website. Of the candidates engaging in biographical issue appeals, candidates engage in between 1 and 19 of these appeals, with a median of 2 and a mean of 2.5 biographical issue appeals on a candidate's campaign website. Additionally, 82% of those candidates engaging in these appeals have between 1 and 3 biographical issue appeals on their campaign website. Along partisan lines, Democrats are more likely to engage in biographical issue appeals than their Republican counterparts (diff = .033, $p < .05$). There are also differences in the identities of candidates who engage in these biographical issue appeals. First, a higher proportion of female candidates than male candidates utilize biographical issue appeals (diff = .079, $p < .001$). Additionally, Black candidates are less likely to engage in biographical issue appeals than non-Black candidates (diff = .078, $p < .001$). When turning attention to personal narrative appeals, similar patterns emerge. Of the candidates engaging in biographical issue appeals, 55% of candidates utilize a personal narrative appeal. Consistent with the findings for biographical issue appeals, women are more likely engage in personal narrative appeals than their male counterparts (diff = .117, $p < .001$). Incumbent candidates are less likely to utilize personal narrative appeals than non-incumbent candidates (diff = .086, $p < .001$) and inexperienced challengers are more likely to use personal narrative appeals than candidates with previous elected experience (diff = .081, $p < .001$). Figure 1 visualizes the differences between candidate characteristics such as race, gender, and candidate experience and the frequency with which these candidates engage in biographical issue appeals and personal narrative appeals.

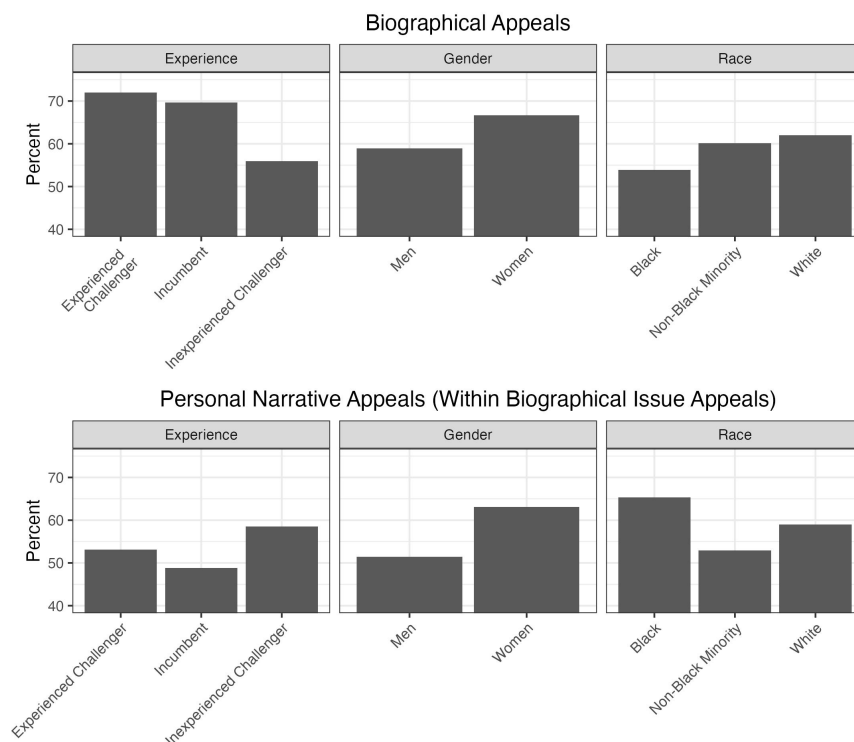


Figure 1: Percent of Candidates Engaging in Biographical Issue Appeals and Personal Narrative Appeals

Additionally, 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 2. 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.

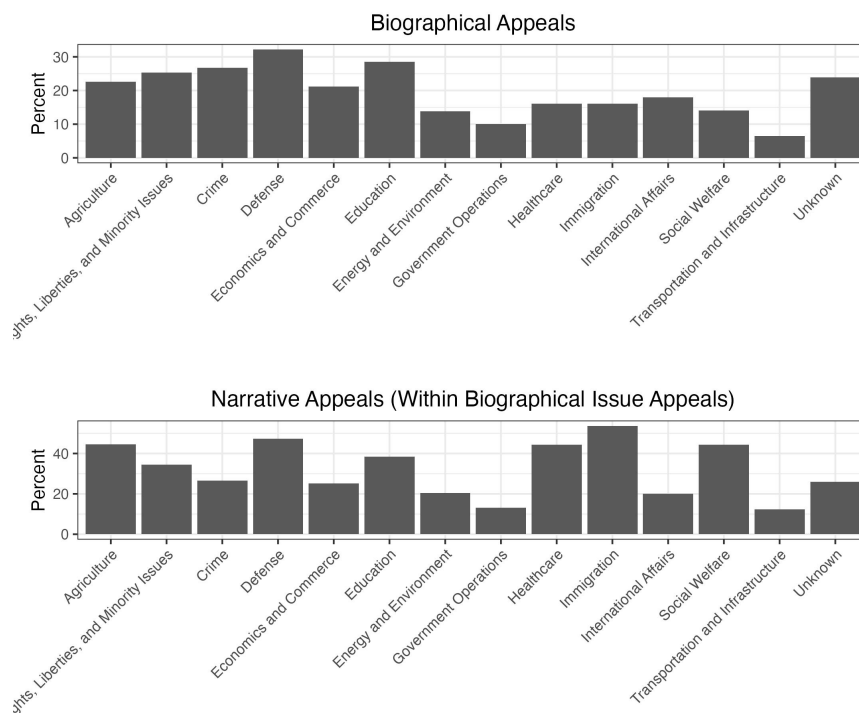


Figure 2: Percent of Candidates Engaging in Biographical Issue Appeals and Personal Narrative Appeals, by Issue Area

Figure 2 also provides an overview of the frequency with which candidates utilize personal narrative appeals on each issue. Specifically, the bottom panel of this figures shows what percent of candidates are engaging in a personal narrative appeal out of the candidates who engage in a biographical issue appeal on that issue. Interestingly, the frequency of biographical issue appeals and personal narrative appeals remains relatively constant across issues. In other words, the policy areas for which candidates most frequently leverage biographical issue appeals (such as defense or education) are also the policy areas that include a higher percentage of personal narrative appeals.

Results

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 GPT-4 labeled any of their campaign website issue statements as a biographical issue appeal in a given election cycle. If none of a candidate's issue statements were classified as a biographical issue appeal, then that candidate receives a 0. The key independent variables to test H1-H3 are candidate experience, candidate fundraising (which serves as a proxy for candidate quality), and electoral competitiveness. To test H1 and H2, 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 H3, I use a factor variable for district competitiveness which classifies districts as either competitive, same party safe, or other party safe 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. For example, if the Democratic candidate won over 55% of the two party vote share in a congressional district, then that district is classified as

same party safe for Democratic congressional candidates and other party safe for Republican candidates in that district.

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 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.⁷ The results of the logistic regression are presented in Table 4.

The results from this model indicate support for many of my hypotheses. My first hypothesis relating to incumbents and the frequency with which these candidates engage in biographical issue appeals receives mixed support. While incumbent candidates are less likely than non-incumbents with previous elected experience to engage in biographical issue appeals, the relationship does not hold when comparing incumbents to inexperienced candidates. I expect the difference between incumbents and experienced non-incumbents 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. In support of H2, candidate quality, as measured through fundraising and experienced challengers, appears to be related to the likelihood that a candidate engages in a biographical issue appeal in their campaign website rhetoric. Finally, candidates running in competitive districts are more likely to engage in biographical issue appeals than candidates

⁷As a robustness check, I also run this logit model with random effects by candidate, the results of which are presented in Table 7 in the Appendix. The results of the model with random effects by candidate are consistent with the results presented here in Table 4.

Table 4: Candidates Engaging In Biographical Issue Appeals

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Biographical Issue Appeal
Female	0.268*** (0.076)
Black	−0.329** (0.100)
Experienced Candidate	0.374** (0.131)
Ref: Incumbent	
Inexperienced Candidate	−0.089 (0.109)
Ref: Incumbent	
Republican	−0.094 (0.070)
2020	0.035 (0.083)
2022	−0.087 (0.080)
Partisan Primary	0.106 (0.116)
Other Party Safe	−0.355*** (0.093)
Ref: Competitive District	
Same Party Safe	−0.226* (0.089)
Ref: Competitive District	
Fundraising	0.082*** (0.008)
Contested Primary	−0.144 (0.099)
Constant	−0.125 (0.211)
Observations	4,213

Note: The unit of observation is the candidate-year level. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001
Standard errors are clustered by candidate.

running in districts that are safe, either for their own or for the opposing party. This is consistent with H3 and 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. Overall, the results of this model suggest that both candidate characteristics and electoral conditions shape the likelihood that candidates engage in biographical issue appeals.

Personal Narrative Appeals

Before evaluating whether biographical issue appeals signal a candidate’s commitment to working on an issue in Congress, I first examine which candidates who engage in a biographical issue appeal are more likely to do so as a personal narrative. This analysis relies on a selection model to account for the fact that the decision to use a personal narrative is conditional on a candidate first choosing to use a biographical issue appeal.⁸ Without accounting for the selection process, a standard logit model predicting narrative use could produce biased estimates, as the subset of candidates who use biographical appeals is not randomly selected from the broader candidate population, as shown in Table 4. By modeling the first-stage selection equation (whether a candidate uses a biographical issue appeal), I can correct for this non-random selection in the second-stage outcome equation (which examines narrative use among those who have already made a biographical appeal). This two-stage model allows me to make more accurate inferences about the predictors of narrative use by isolating their effects from the selection process that determines who is at risk of using a narrative appeal.

Both stages are modeled using a probit specification because both the selection and outcome variables are binary. The first stage models the likelihood that a candidate chooses

⁸An alternative way to conceptualize this model is as a multinomial logit, where candidates are sorted into three mutually exclusive categories: no biographical issue appeal, a biographical issue appeal with a personal narrative, and a biographical issue appeal without a personal narrative. The results of this multinomial logit are presented in Table 8 and Table 9 in the Appendix. However, I am still uncertain about which model is most appropriate, and I hope to discuss this further during my defense.

to make a biographical issue appeal, using predictors such as electoral conditions (e.g., district competitiveness) and candidate characteristics (e.g., race, party, and gender), as shown in Table 4. The second stage models the likelihood that candidates who have already made a biographical appeal do so using a personal narrative, with candidate characteristics (race, gender, and inexperience) as the predictors of interest. A critical feature of the two-stage model is the exclusion restriction, which requires that at least one variable must influence selection into the first stage (the decision to use a biographical appeal) but not directly affect the outcome in the second stage (the use of a personal narrative). I assume that electoral conditions—such as district competitiveness—affect whether a candidate chooses to engage in a biographical appeal but do not directly influence the likelihood of using a personal narrative. Instead, I argue that narrative use is more likely shaped by the candidate’s personal identity and experiences. Table 5 presents the results of the outcome equation.⁹

Table 5: Outcome Equation of Selection Model: Candidate Engages in Personal Narrative Appeal

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Personal Narrative Appeal
Female	0.156*** (0.056)
Black	0.097 (0.071)
Inexperienced Candidate	0.338*** (0.047)
Constant	0.260*** (0.059)
Observed	2,558
Censored	1,655
Total	4,213
<i>Note:</i> *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

The results of this model demonstrate mixed support for my hypotheses related to descriptive identities of candidates. Consistent with H5, of candidates who engage in biographi-

⁹The selection stage results are not presented again, but they are consistent with those shown in Table 4.

cal issue appeals, female candidates are more likely to do so as a personal narrative than their male counterparts. The same is not true, however, for Black candidates which runs contrary to my hypothesis about candidate race. This result suggests that, while Black candidates overall are less likely to engage in biographical issue appeals, those who do utilize biographical issue appeals are just as likely to do as personal narratives as non-Black candidates. Lastly, there appears to be support for H7 which suggests that inexperienced candidates who engage in biographical issue appeals will be more likely to do so as a personal narrative. This is consistent with expectations that inexperienced candidates will have to lean heavily on their story in order to demonstrate their competence and credibility because they do not have a record, either in Congress or at a different level of government, to campaign on. Overall, the results of this model suggest that of the candidates who engage in biographical issue appeals in their campaign rhetoric, there are meaningful differences in how these candidates communicate about their biography. Specifically, candidate characteristics such as gender or political experience may be related to the likelihood that a candidate engages in storytelling about their own experience when on the campaign trail.

Personal Appeals and Legislative Activity

Demonstrating which candidates use biographical issue appeals and personal narrative 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 is a series of indicators demonstrating whether the member campaigned on that issue, whether the member campaigned on that issue using a biographical issue appeal, and whether the member campaigned on that issue using a personal narrative 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. These fixed effects allow to control for unobserved, time-invariant characteristics that may impact a member of Congress' level of legislative activity (e.g. assignment to a powerful committee, being part of party leadership). 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 are presented in Table 6 below:

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.¹⁰ 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 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

¹⁰This finding also holds when changing the DV of interest to be total cosponsorships rather than original cosponsorships

Table 6: Biographical Appeals and Legislative Activity, 116th-118th Congress

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Original Cosponsorships
Campaign on Issue Area	0.280*** (0.017)
Biographical Appeal on Issue Area	0.117*** (0.029)
Narrative Appeal on Issue Area	0.035 (0.039)
Constant	-0.297 (0.263)
Member-Year Fixed Effects	✓
Policy Area Fixed Effects	✓
Observations	14,365
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

the number of original cosponsorships that a member pursues on that issue. 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. Finally, it does not appear that personal narrative appeals on an issue are associated with a significant increase in legislative activity on that issue. This runs contrary to my hypothesis that personal narrative appeals would be an especially strong signal of legislative commitment to an issue. Candidates who engage in a personal narrative appeal on an issue are not more likely to act on that legislative priority than candidates who use a non-narrative biographical issue appeal or even just a generic appeal. However, it is important to note that narrative appeals in their own right are predictive of legislative activity on an issue. When modeling original cosponsorships on an issue with just campaign statements and narrative appeals as independent variables, narrative appeals are predictive of more legislative activity on an issue. These results suggest that while both biographical issue appeals and narrative

appeals in campaign communications are signals of a credible commitment, there is not a significant difference in how a candidate weaves together her position on an issue and her biography as it relates to original cosponsorship on legislation that issue.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Overall, the results of these analyses demonstrate that biographical issue appeals are a highly prevalent issue messaging strategy in campaign communications. 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, gender, and political experience, as well as the electoral conditions a candidate is competing under. Incumbent candidates and black candidates are less likely to engage in biographical appeals, while female candidates are more likely to do so than their male counterparts. 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. Furthermore, there is clear variation in how candidates engage in biographical issue appeals. Specifically, a subset of candidates utilize personal narrative appeals and engage in storytelling when communicating how their biography connects to the issue positions they hold. There are multiple reasons for why candidates would engage in a biographical issue appeal or a personal narrative appeal. More work should be done on interrogating the mechanism at work and determining whether these candidates are signaling competence, a credible commitment, relating to voters and demonstrating “I’m one of you” (Fenno 1978), or some combination of all three. To begin this process, I also evaluate whether biographical issue appeals and personal narrative appeals are indeed a credible signal of legislative commitment. I find that this is indeed the case. 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 issues 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.

As briefly alluded to in the measurement section of this paper, I am currently working on an updated measurement of biographical issue appeals and personal narrative appeals. Considering the underperformance of the machine learning models and concerns over the reproducibility of probabilistic labeling using a large language model such as GPT-4, I am continuing to work on developing a machine learning pipeline to better classify which candidate issue statements are biographical issue appeals and personal narrative appeals. This method uses non-probabilistic text embeddings from OpenAI to train five different supervised machine learning models to classify paragraphs from issue statements as biographical issue appeals and combines the predictions of those models through a logistic regression meta-learner. Additionally, I also hope to expand this project by incorporating more specific aspects about a candidate's background, such as their occupation or veteran status, to develop a more in-depth understanding of which types of candidates engage in biographical issue appeals and follow through on those commitments once in office. Finally, as briefly mentioned, more work is needed to interrogate the mechanism at work when candidates engage in biographical issue appeals and personal narrative appeals. Specifically, I hope to expand

this project to incorporate how voters react to and are persuaded by candidates engaging in biographical issue appeals and personal narrative appeals. Do voters see candidates who utilize biographical issue appeals as more competent, committed, and relateable? How do these appeals impact vote choice and other evaluations of candidates such as trust, respect, and animosity? As is well documented by decades of political science research, it is incredibly difficult to engage in meaningful persuasion, particularly enough that a person votes against their partisan affiliation (Campbell et al. 1960). However, at the primary election stage, in which many voters cannot rely on partisanship, there is the potential for candidate issue messaging strategies, such as using biographical issue appeals, to be particularly impactful. Overall, understanding these dynamics is crucial for assessing the effectiveness of different messaging strategies and their influence on voter decision-making, electoral outcomes, and ultimately, democratic representation in Congress.

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Appendix

Table 7: Candidates Engaging In Biographical Issue Appeals with Random Effects by Candidate

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Biographical Issue Appeal
Female	0.321** (0.103)
Black	−0.495*** (0.139)
Experienced Candidate	0.386* (0.173)
Ref: Incumbent	
Inexperienced Candidate	−0.205 (0.148)
Ref: Incumbent	
Republican	−0.176 (0.095)
Partisan Primary	0.114 (0.156)
Other Party Safe	−0.485*** (0.125)
Ref: Competitive District	
Same Party Safe	−0.298* (0.118)
Ref: Competitive District	
Fundraising	0.109*** (0.011)
Contested Primary	−0.164 (0.127)
Constant	−0.020 (0.280)
Candidate Random Effects	✓
Year Fixed Effects	✓
Observations	4,213
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 8: Multinomial Logit Coefficients (Baseline: No Biographical Issue Appeal)

	BIA w/o Narrative	BIA w/ Narrative
Intercept	-0.820*** (0.197)	-0.893*** (0.194)
Experienced Challengers	0.180 (0.140)	0.439*** (0.141)
Ref: Incumbent		
Inexperienced Candidates	-0.439*** (0.116)	0.122 (0.115)
Ref: Incumbent		
Other Party Safe	-0.231* (0.112)	-0.426*** (0.105)
Ref: Competitive District		
Same Party Safe	-0.169 (0.105)	-0.281** (0.101)
Ref: Competitive District		
Female	0.092 (0.093)	0.399*** (0.085)
Republican	0.293*** (0.084)	-0.446*** (0.079)
Black	-0.203 (0.123)	-0.421*** (0.116)
Fundraising	0.070*** (0.010)	0.095*** (0.010)

Note:

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 9: Odds Ratios from Multinomial Logit Model (Baseline: No Biographical Issue Appeal)

	BIA w/o Narrative	BIA w/ Narrative
Intercept	0.44***	0.41***
Experienced Challengers	1.20	1.55***
Ref: Incumbent		
Inexperienced Candidates	0.65***	1.13
Ref: Incumbent		
Other Party Safe	0.79*	0.65***
Ref: Competitive District		
Same Party Safe	0.84	0.76**
Ref: Competitive District		
Female	1.10	1.49***
Republican	1.34***	0.64***
Black	0.82	0.66***
Fundraising	1.07***	1.10***

Note: Odds ratios computed as exp(coef)

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001