Dog-Whistle Politics: Multivocal Communication and Religious Appeals

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Abstract   This paper explores how multivocal appeals, meaning appeals that have distinct meanings to different audiences, work with respect to religious language. Religious language is common in politics, but there is great variation in its effectiveness. I argue that multivocal appeals can resonate as religious with select audiences but have no religious content for other listeners. I test the effectiveness of multivocal and obvious religious appeals experimentally with two national samples: an ingroup that understands the religious connotations in a multivocal appeal and a religiously diverse outgroup that does not. Religious appeals are persuasive for the ingroup, but an obvious religious appeal can be politically costly by triggering negative reactions among outgroup members, while the religious meaning in a multivocal appeal eludes them. Obvious religious appeals are costly in the diverse audience because of different preferences over the appropriate role for religion in political speech.

Keywords   Religion and politics · Campaigns · Persuasion

In the 2002 State of the Union, George Bush declared "there's power, wonder-working power, in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people." The way this language was interpreted varied. For some, the phrase "wonder-working power" had no particular meaning, but those who had been exposed to a popular evangelical hymn recognized the line as a refrain in "There is Power in the Blood." Candidates and politicians frequently invoke religious language (Domke and Coe 2007), and Bush's use of a religious reference is not exceptional. Much research points to an important role for religion and there is growing interest in

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religious persuasion (Calfano and Djupe 2009; Albertson 2011; Chapp 2012). The wonder-working power reference suggests an important question: how does targeted language, or language that has a special meaning for a subset of the population, affect political attitudes? This article examines the effects of both religious language and multivocal communication in candidate appeals.

President Bush's use of religious appeals has been the subject of some media attention. As Bruce Lincoln writes in the *Boston Globe*, "aware that he must appeal to the center to secure reelection, he employs double-coded signals that veil much of his religious message from outsiders" (September 12, 2004). David Kuo, who worked for various prominent Republicans and served in the George W. Bush administration, wrote "we threw in a few obscure turns of phrase known clearly to any evangelical, yet unlikely to be noticed by anyone else, even Kemp (who he was writing for)" (p. 59). Multivocal communication, or "dog-whistle politics,"[1] as it has been labeled is not specific to George W. Bush's rhetoric, or even Republicans; Bill Clinton used the phrase "send me" to structure his endorsement for John Kerry at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. The phrase references a passage in the Bible (*Isaiah* 6:8). Ronald Reagan used language in his 1984 State of the Union address that closely paralleled another biblical passage: "Let us be sure that those who come after will say of us in our time, that in our time we did everything that could be done. We finished the race; we kept them free; we kept the faith."[2] Both are examples of language that has religious connotations for a subset of the population. Multivocal communication such as this might be particularly effective because it targets those predisposed to respond favorably to the message and goes over the heads of those who might be turned off by it.

The purpose of this article is to explore the mechanism of multivocal communication in American politics through the lens of religious language. I argue that given the religious landscape of the United States, multivocal religious appeals should be particularly effective, when compared to obvious religious appeals and to appeals without any religious content. I test this hypothesis experimentally with two national samples; one sample is religiously diverse and the other is Pentecostal, a religious group chosen based on their familiarity with the targeted appeal in this study. I find that both multivocal and obvious religious appeals are effective among targeted religious sample, but that an obvious religious appeal can hurt a candidate in a religiously diverse population, particularly among those who object to religious discourse in politics.

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[1] The phrase "dog-whistle politics," draws upon the way that dog-whistles are perceptible to dogs but not to humans due to their high frequency. The term became popular during the 2005 election in the UK, where the exemplar of dog-whistle politics was the Conservative slogan, "Are you thinking what we're thinking?" The slogan was said to appeal to those who opposed Labour's stance on immigration. The term has its roots in Australia where it was associated with a political strategist, Lynton Crosby. Crosby ran Australian Prime Minister John Howard's campaigns before consulting in British politics. The phrase reached William Safire's "On Language" column in *The New York Times* in 2005. The 2005 campaign in the UK was arguably a failed attempt at dog-whistle politics, because the possible meanings of "Are you thinking what we're thinking" became a topic of debate.

[2] I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith (2 *Timothy* 4:7).

Multivocal Communication in Political Appeals

Multivocal communication occurs when the same words have distinct meanings to different audiences.[3] In political speech, multivocal communication reflects situations where the sender of a message sends a targeted appeal to an ingroup that understands the specific meaning of a particular phrase based on a shared history of past practice while an outgroup remains unaware. These sorts of multivocal appeals are a form of targeted marketing, which allows politicians to deliver a tailored message to a subset of the population. Politicians often rely on information networks to engage in targeted marketing. For example, white Democrats used targeted marketing to appeal to black voters in the south when they relied on black leaders, churches, and media. These "surgical" appeals generally went unnoticed by white audiences (Glaser 1986). Glaser explains that white Democrats walked a tightrope, trying to motivate black voters without alienating white Democrats.[4] More recently, micro-targeting, where campaigns rely on data to pinpoint potential supporters, to whom they direct their campaign materials has received significant attention in academic (Hillygus and Shields 2008) and popular work (Fournier et al. 2006).

As suggested above, the tactic of using the same words to signal distinct meanings to diverse audiences has gained increased popular currency under the moniker of "dog-whistle" politics. For example, George W. Bush's mentioned the Dred Scott decision in a presidential debate. His language simply referenced the disastrous 1,857 decision for some viewers, but it had a different meaning for others. Bush's curious Dred Scott reference in the context of a question about judicial nominations was arguably a way to signal to Christian conservatives that he would nominate a justice who disagreed with Roe v. Wade (Kirkpatrick 2004). The two cases have been linked in the Christian, pro-life community based on their association between slavery and abortion.[5] The appeal was targeted based on its limited cultural resonance; the appeal only signaled abortion to a narrow subset of the population. Given the controversial nature of an anti-Roe v. Wade signal, the specificity of the cue was strategic. The effects of multivocal references can depend on race, gender, religion or other social grouping. White (2007) showed how an

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[3] The concept was used by Padgett and Ansell (1993) in a piece about the rise of the Medici in fifteenth century Italy. They argued that multivocality connotes "single actions that can be interpreted coherently from multiple perspectives simultaneously" (1993, p. 1263). Tilly used a different label for the concept, polyvalent performance, defined as "individual or collective presentation of gestures simultaneously to two or more audiences in ways that code differently within the audiences" (2003, p. 176). A similar observation was made earlier by Gamson (1992). He notes that "people bring their own experiences and personal associations to their readings of cultural texts" (p. 125), and so members of a heterogeneous audience can find different meanings in the same communication. While the concept of multivocality has been used in diverse literatures, its effectiveness has not been tested experimentally.

[4] In a 1981 congressional race in Mississippi, Democratic candidate Wayne Dowdy did attract attention for his surgical appeals in support of the Voting Rights Act to the black community, but it happened late in the campaign and did not undermine the effectiveness of his campaign (Glaser 1996, pp. 48–49).

[5] They argue that abortion and slavery are both instances where the strong, or politically powerful, have a responsibility to protect the weak, and that an overly activist Supreme Court erred in both Dred Scott and Roe v. Wade by not recognizing the humanity in slaves and the unborn (Buckley 2000).

ambiguous racial appeal affects racial groups differently: the words "inner city" caused whites to base their support for increased spending on food stamps on outgroup resentment while African Americans resisted the cue, suggesting that the language carried different meanings for different racial groups. In the area of religious appeals, Calfano and Djupe (2009) show that multivocal religious appeals boost support among Christian respondents and they cause Christian respondents to view the candidate as more Republican.[6]

There are overlaps between multivocal political appeals and the more frequently studied phenomenon of coded communication (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino et al. 2002; Hurwitz and Peffley 2005; White 2007), which has focused on racial appeals. Both are types of appeals by elites that help them speak to diverse audiences. However, coded appeals are those that make deniable references while multivocal appeals need not be deniable. For example, campaign officials could deny that language about "inner cities" or the Willie Horton ad used in the 1988 presidential campaign were meant to cue race, while the religious content of "wonder-working power" is not deniable: the phrase functions as a strategic message because it only signals shared religious affiliation to those who are similarly religious.

Multivocal appeals are regularly observed in the advertising literature. Brumbaugh (2002) argues that targeted advertisements that include "both similar subculture sources and other subculture relevant cues… induce members of subcultures to draw on this knowledge to allow them to create meaning that others outside this subculture cannot" (p. 259). For example, Subaru ran advertisements in which the cars' license plates read "XENA LVR" and "P TOWN." The references were meant to appeal to gay and lesbians without alienating others who were unaware of the significance of the license plates (Kanner 2000). This advertising campaign, which also included the slogan "It's not a choice. It's the way we're built" was intended to operate as multivocal communication; one of the campaign's developers explains, "it's apparent to gay people that we're talking about being gay, but straight people don't know what's going on" (Poux, quoted in Palmer 2000). In these examples, language has a meaning that is only "heard" by some; for example, references to hymns, prayers, and biblical passages will resonate with those who share a religious tradition, but this religious meaning will be imperceptible to those who do not.[7]

Targeted marketing risks alienating the outgroup if they are aware of the meaning conveyed to the ingroup. The broader audience may simply fail to be persuaded or might develop negative attitudes towards the advertisement (Aaker et al. 2000).[8] In

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[6] Calfano and Djupe (2009) use the term "coded communication" to reference what I call multivocal communication. I argue that multivocal is the more precise term because it references language with distinct meanings in different populations. In the political science literature, most research on coded appeals has focused on deniable racial appeals. While coded appeals might be deniable because the language is vague, a specific meaning of a multivocal appeal can reach a select audience based on its precision.

[7] Images and music are also likely to resonate differently depending upon the audience, but their effects are beyond the scope of this study.

[8] In marketing research, non-target effects occur when the non-target group is the majority group but not when the non-target group is in the minority. Minority group members are accustomed to being the non-

politics, an obvious appeal to a religious group might cause some voters not in that religious group to doubt that this is the politician for them, while with multivocal communication, the outgroup might be unaware of the message. Appeals that are targeted through cultural specificity are like the Subaru ad; they offer a message that eludes the outgroup. In politics, this method of reaching the target audience might be particularly attractive. Politicians can attempt to narrowcast their targeted messages, but the proliferation of media outlets that makes narrowcasting possible also creates more possibilities for other sources in the media to pick up on the message and bring it to a wider audience.[9]

A successful multivocal communication occurs because the outgroup is not only oblivious to the more specific content of the reference, they are unaware a reference has even been made. This type of communication could lose its multivocal quality by making the religious content obvious to all. The multivocal communication "wonder-working power" would have been an obvious religious appeal if President George W. Bush had included language such as, "As I sing in church, there is power…" In Bill Clinton's 1992 Democratic Convention speech, he quotes scripture explicitly twice. One example is "as the Scripture says, 'our eyes have not yet seen, nor our ears heard, nor minds imagined' what we can build" (*1 Corinthians 2:9*). This message might have been rendered multivocal simply by omitting the language "as the Scripture says."

With multivocal appeals, knowledge of the reference works to distinguish between the targeted audience and the rest of the crowd. While these appeals share many qualities with other forms of targeted marketing, the effects of these appeals have not yet been studied. Can a multivocal political appeal retain its surgical quality, even if the language is heard by everyone? How will those who understand the more targeted message react? This type of communication represents a different dimension in political appeals, and its effectiveness and mechanisms for persuasion are unknown. A focus on religious appeals in American politics provides an opportunity to assessing the scope for and role of multivocal communication.

Religion is a powerful force in American politics (e.g. Wilcox 2000; Layman 2001; Morone 2003), and religious persuasion is receiving growing attention in political science (Domke and Coe 2007; Calfano and Djupe 2009). One reason religious appeals might work in American politics is that Americans themselves are very religious (Inglehart and Baker 2000). In politics, people prefer candidates who are similar to them across a variety of characteristics. Similarity in gender, age, and race appear to increase willingness to vote for a candidate (Sigelman and Sigelman 1982).

Footnote 8 continued

target group, and typically do not develop negative feelings towards advertisements directed at other audiences.

[9] For example, former Mississippi Senator Trent Lott's comments in support of South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond might have stayed at Thurmond's 100th birthday party if bloggers had not pursued the story (Lessig 2004). His statement "When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over the years, either," ultimately triggered calls for his resignation as Senate Majority Leader and he stepped down.

The religious landscape in the United States points to a possible constraint on religious persuasion. In international comparisons, Americans are notable for both their high levels of religiosity and their religious diversity. When compared to citizens of other countries, especially other advanced industrial democracies, Americans are among the highest in religious service attendance and in their ratings of importance of God in their lives (Inglehart and Baker 2000). Many believe that Americans are highly religious because the United States is religiously diverse (Olson 1998; Finke and Stark 1992). Religious affiliation and adherence creates politically relevant ingroups and outgroups. Though personal connections across religious cleavages might make Americans accepting of diverse faiths (Putnam and Campbell 2010), religious appeals that signal particular faith communities may not be persuasive. Indeed, people may even develop more negative attitudes towards a politician who makes an overt religious appeal when it is clear that they are not part of the ingroup.

A second possible constraint on the effectiveness of religious appeals is that Americans have varying levels of tolerance for religious discourse in politics. Survey research indicates that Americans have differing views regarding the desirability of religious language in political appeals. According to a 2012 survey, 38 % of Americans surveyed believe that politicians express faith and prayer too much, 30 % feel that there is too little religious expression, and 25 % believe that there is the right amount (Pew Research Center 2012). Preference against religious language in politics is an interesting moderator because it is correlated with religious belief, but there is variation on these preferences among both religious and non-religious Americans, and these preferences are related to partisanship. For instance, in 2012, 46 % of Democrats, 42 % of Independents and 24 % of Republicans said that there was "too much" religious talk from politicians. Given differing preferences for religious language in politics, and the variety of religious faiths practiced by Americans, a clever politician might try to navigate these differences by appealing to some without losing others. Given that there is religious diversity in the United States, the unique appeal of multivocal language is that it allows politicians to speak directly to like-minded others, communicating to them common ground and shared values, while those who do not share this perspective remain oblivious.

Hypotheses

I hypothesize that multivocal religious appeals are persuasive in American politics and I separate my expectations by group: an ingroup, defined as people who share the religious tradition of the speaker and understand the religious content of the multivocal religious appeal, and an outgroup that is unaware of the religious content in the multivocal religious appeal.

Ingroup Hypotheses

I hypothesize that religious language is persuasive among the ingroup. I expect that similarly religious respondents will evaluate a candidate more favorably when he

makes either a multivocal religious appeal or an obvious religious appeal when compared to a similar appeal without any religious content. My expectations regarding multivocal versus obvious religious language are less certain. The multivocal appeal may be more persuasive than the obvious appeal: there might be an added appeal based on the exclusivity of the language because it signals a smaller ingroup and a more authentic connection. On the other hand, members of the ingroup might prefer an obvious religious appeal, which makes the connection apparent to all, or they may not distinguish between multivocal and obvious appeals. I hypothesize that obvious and multivocal religious appeals will be more persuasive than a non-religious appeal for the ingroup, and also test whether the nature of the appeal (obvious vs. multivocal) matters for the ingroup.

Outgroup Hypotheses

I have different expectations for the outgroup. I expect that the religious content in multivocal religious appeals will go over their heads: members of the outgroup will not distinguish between an appeal with multivocal religious language and a similar appeal without any religious language. I also expect that an obvious religious appeal will lead to more negative attitudes towards the candidate, and that this effect is moderated by preferences over the desirability of religion in politics. Significant portions of the US population think that there should be less religious discourse in politics, and I hypothesize that they punish politicians for making religious appeals.

Methods and Procedures

In order to test hypotheses experimentally, I recruited two national samples; one was a general US sample recruited through a marketing firm (Pacific Market Research). The other was recruited via Knowledge Networks, based on a previous survey in which participants self identified as Pentecostal. Both groups participated in the study over the Internet. While neither sample is nationally representative, both are diverse and appropriate given the experimental design.[10]

Subjects were asked to watch a brief video and were told that the video was prepared on behalf of a congressional candidate for an upcoming party convention. Subjects were randomly assigned to view one of three videos, which had identical visuals. The video was 40 s long and it presented a series of still photos from a real campaign ad, while a voice-over (attributed to the candidate) played. The speeches in each condition were identical except for the last sentence, which was manipulated to include either multivocal religious language, obvious religious language, or no religious language.[11]

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[10] On the use of samples of convenience, see Druckman and Kam (2011).

[11] The full text of the speech was as follows:

Americans are doing the work of compassion every day: visiting prisoners, providing shelter for battered women, bringing companionship to lonely seniors. These good works deserve our praise, they deserve our personal support and, when appropriate, they deserve the assistance of the federal

Last Sentence—Multivocal Religious Language Condition I believe there is power—wonder-working power—in the goodness and idealism of the American people.[12]

Last Sentence—Obvious Religious Language Condition As I sing in church, there is power—wonder-working power—in the goodness and idealism of the American people.

Last Sentence—No Religious Language Condition I believe there is power in the goodness and idealism of the American people.

After viewing the video, subjects were asked a series of questions designed to assess their attitudes towards the candidate and the video. Subjects were asked how positive their initial impression of the candidate was (*Initial Impression*) and how likely they would be to vote for the candidate (*Vote*).[13] Responses to each were measured on a 5-point scale.

Traits and Emotions

Subjects were asked if the candidate made them feel a series of emotions, and whether they would describe the candidate as having certain traits. Positive emotions (interested, inspired, proud) were added to create a scale as were negative emotions (nervous, upset). Positive traits (moral, knowledgeable, strong, likeable) and negative traits (insincere, inexperienced) were also combined to create additive scales. All scales are recoded to range from 0 to 1.

Religious Measures

Subjects were asked their religious denomination (General Sample) and for their beliefs about the Bible as a measure of fundamentalism. In addition, they were asked their opinion on the appropriateness of religious discourse in politics: whether they thought there was currently too much, too little, or about the right amount of expression of faith and prayer by political leaders. At the end of the study, subjects were asked if they were familiar with the phrase "wonder-working power." In the general population study, if they answered yes to this question, they were asked where they had heard it in an open-ended follow-up question.

Footnote 11 continued

government. One of my goals is to apply the compassion of America to the deepest problems of America. For so many in our country the need is great. I believe there is power—wonder-working power—in the goodness and idealism of the American people. [The last sentence was manipulated].

[12] The multivocal condition is taken from George W. Bush's 2003 State of the Union Address. In the original, Bush also uses the word "faith" to describe the American people. I removed this word from each condition so that the control condition would not have any religious content.

[13] See appendix for full question wording.

Sample Characteristics

The first study targeted Pentecostals and was recruited through Knowledge
Networks.[14] This was a national sample of 402 subjects who had identified as
Pentecostals in a previous survey.[15] I chose this sample for testing the ingroup
hypotheses because my preliminary research suggested that Pentecostals are
familiar with the hymn, "There is Power in the Blood."[16] This sample ranged in age
from 18 to 83 and is 60 % female. 31 % of the sample has a high school degree,
39 % has some college and 22 % has a bachelor's degree or higher. 47 % of this
sample identifies as Republican and 35 % identifies as Democratic.

The second study was conducted with a general population sample with 783
respondents.[17] The survey was carried out through a marketing firm, and while this
was not a nationally representative sample, there is useful variation on many
demographic variables. Respondents' ages range from 18 to 89 and the sample is
56 % female. 20 % of the sample has a high school degree, 40 % has had some
college, and 37 % has a college degree. In terms of political variables, 40 % of the
sample identified as Democrat and 27 % identified as Republican. Respondents in
this sample are religiously diverse. Three quarters of the sample identifies as
Christian, but there is considerable variation among Christians in the sample, and
the two most common traditions are Catholic and Baptist. 17 % of the sample does
not affiliate with any religious denomination. When asked about their level of
religiosity, 21 % responded that they are not at all religious while another 21 %
report that they are very religious, with the other 58 % split between slightly and
somewhat religious. Almost half of the sample, 43 %, says that there is too little
religious discourse in politics, while 27 % report that there is too much and 30 %
say there is about the right amount.

Of the 402 Pentecostals who were given this survey, 84 % indicated that they had
heard the phrase "wonder-working power" before. Comparing the 84 % of the
Pentecostal sample with the 24 % of the general sample who expressed familiarity

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[14] Pentecostals are interesting as a political group: Church of God in Christ and Assemblies of God, two
large Pentecostal denominations have each more than quadrupled their membership since 1970, and have
a combined membership of more than 8 million (Briggs 2006). Pentecostal's growing popularity among
formerly Catholic Latinos might have political ramifications; Latinos who are Catholic tend to vote for
Democrats, while Latinos who identify as Pentecostal tend to vote Republican (Geis 2006).

[15] This study was fielded between May 8, 2006 and May 20, 2006. Participants qualified for this survey
based on 3 criteria. They must be: (1) 18 or older, (2) identified as Pentecostal according to Knowledge
Networks' religion item collected on its Public Affairs Survey, and (3) see and hear the video clip played
during the survey. The survey was fielded to 1,046 people, with 726 completes (69.4% completion rate).
Of these, 482 saw the video and qualified (qualification rate: 66.4%) for an overall AAPOR Response
Rate (3) of 31.4%. 80 of the 482 qualified subjects were mistakenly collected from the national sample
(not from the Pentecostal group) and they are dropped from these analyses for an *n* of 402. I use the post
stratification weight supplied by Knowledge Networks for all analyses involving the sample.

[16] Ten regionally and racially diverse Pentecostal churches were called, under the pretense of a school
project tracing the use of hymns. The person who answered the phone was asked about their familiarity
with three hymns: Five of the ten agreed to participate and all five were familiar with "There is Power in
the Blood." Familiarity with the other two hymns varied, suggesting that familiarity was genuine, rather
than driven by agreement effects.

[17] The response rate for this survey was 56%.

with the phrase "wonder-working power" confirms that this is language with targeted cultural resonance, and therefore an appropriate manipulation for the experiment.[18] Familiarity was not correlated with the experimental condition in either sample (General sample: $\chi^2 = 3.65$, $p = .16$, Pentecostal sample: $\chi^2 = 1.10$, $p = .58$).

Results

Study 1: Religious Sample, used for Ingroup Analysis

Do religious appeals resonate among similarly religious people? I use the Pentecostal sample for this section, and because I am interested in how both multivocal and obvious religious appeals operate among people who understand the religious meaning of the appeal, I select for the 340 subjects (84 % of the sample) who expressed familiarity with the phrase "wonder-working power." This leaves behind a subset of people who were not familiar with the phrase and are likely different on other dimensions as well. I repeat the analysis with the full sample and note when this creates different results.

I hypothesized that a politician's use of religious language would be persuasive among religious voters, and I speculated that multivocal religious appeal might be particularly persuasive. Compared to the control group, people who heard either religious message developed a more positive initial impression of the candidate (control condition (3.47) vs. multivocal appeal (3.94), $t = 4.71$, $p < .01$; vs. obvious appeal (3.73), $t = 2.53$, $p < .05$). Further, the candidate made a more positive impression when he used the multivocal appeal compared to the obvious appeal ($t = 2.00$, $p < .05$). An analysis of variance demonstrates the significance of the manipulation on initial impressions ($F = 9.60$, 2 df, $p < .01$). This establishes the basic effect, that religious rhetoric affects impressions of a candidate for religious people, and that multivocal religious appeals are more successful than obvious religious appeals. Turning to voting intention, I find that compared to the control condition, the multivocal religious appeal made people more likely to vote for the candidate (3.27 vs. 3.51, $t = 2.55$, $p < .05$). There is some evidence that participants in the obvious religious language condition were also more likely to vote for the candidate compared to the control condition, but this effect did not reach statistical significance (3.27 vs. 3.42, $t = 1.59$, $p = .11$), though the overall effect of the experimental manipulation on voting intention is significant ($F = 2.82$, 2 df, $p < .10$).[19]

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[18] The vast majority of subjects who said they had heard the phrase before identified the source as either "church" or "hymn" in an open-ended question that followed. Subjects did not report that they identified the language with George W. Bush. It is possible that they identified the language with Bush and did not remember it at a conscious level or chose not to share it.

[19] When the same analyses were done among the full sample (including subjects who were unfamiliar with the religious message), the results for initial impression are consistent ($F = 3.27$, $p < .05$) but the effect of religious language on vote intention is no longer significant ($F = 1.98$, $p = .14$).

Religious language also affected people's emotional reactions to the candidate, as well as trait assessments.[20] Subjects who heard either kind of religious appeal reported higher levels of positive emotional reactions (control (.37) vs. multivocal (.46), t = 2.73, $p < .01$; vs. obvious (.44), t = 2.12, $p < .05$). The overall effect of the experimental manipulation on positive emotions is significant ($F = 3.42$, 3 df, $p < .05$). Similarly, religious appeals affected positive trait assessments (control (.47) vs. multivocal (.57) t = 3.26, $p < .01$; vs. obvious (.55) t = 3.05, $p < .01$), Overall effect: $F = 5.93$, 2 df, $p < .01$). Both forms of religious appeals made people feel better about the candidate and caused people to see the candidate in a positive light. While both forms of religious appeals affected positive emotions and trait assessments, the effects on negative emotions and trait assessments are less clear. Religious appeals produced a slightly heightened negative emotional reaction (control (.05) vs. multivocal (.07) t = 1.69, $p < .10$; vs. obvious (.08) t = 2.04, $p < .05$), though the overall effect is not significant ($F = 1.97$, 2 df, $p = .14$). The effect of religious appeals on negative trait assessments was also not significant ($F = 1.63$, 2 df, $p = .20$).[21]

Study 2: General Sample, used for Outgroup Analysis

Having established the effectiveness of a multivocal religious appeal among the similarly religious sample, I now turn to the general sample. 24 % of this sample expressed familiarity with the phrase "wonder-working power," and of those, 83 % of these correctly mentioned its religious origins in an open-ended question. Statistical analysis in this section is presented excluding these 153 participants because their knowledge of the language makes them inappropriate for analyzing effects among the outgroup. I note when their inclusion in the analysis would produce different results.

I hypothesized that the candidate would alienate some voters when he makes an obviously religious appeal but that a multivocal religious appeal would not affect their attitudes. People formed a worse initial impression of the candidate when they heard the obvious appeal but not when they heard the multivocal religious appeal [control (3.66) vs. obvious (3.44), t = 2.55, $p < .05$; vs. multivocal (3.61), t = 0.63, $p = .53$). The obvious religious appeal also made these subjects less willing to vote for the candidate, while the multivocal appeal did not [control (3.35) vs. obvious (3.03), t = 3.53, $p < .01$; vs. multivocal (3.22) t = 1.52, $p = 13$. Analysis of variance reveals an overall effect of the experimental manipulation on initial impression (F = 3.66, 2 df, $p < .05$) and vote intention (F = 6.84, 2 df, $p < .01$).[22] The outgroup did not distinguish between the multivocal religious

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[20] See appendix for question wording. Cronbach's $\propto$ for each scale: positive emotions (interested, inspired, proud) .90, negative emotions (nervous, upset) .76, positive traits (moral, knowledgeable, likeable, strong leader) .93, negative traits (insincere, inexperienced) .67.

[21] Analysis of the emotion and trait dependent variables differed when conducted with the full sample. Among the emotion and trait measures, the experimental manipulation affected positive trait assessments (F = 2.39, $p < .10$) and negative trait assessments (F = 2.66, $p < .10$), but not emotions.

[22] Among the full sample ($n = 783$), the manipulation had a significant effect on both initial impression (F = 2.89, 2 df, $p < .10$) and vote intention (F = 5.12, 2 df, $p < .01$).

appeal and the appeal without religious content, which makes sense since they did not understand the religious content in the appeal.

Turning to emotional reactions and trait assessments, I find further evidence that the obvious religious appeal had a negative effect for the candidate.[23] The obvious religious appeal decreased positive emotional response while the multivocal appeal had no effect [control (.42) vs. obvious (.35) t = 2.90, $p < .01$; vs. multivocal (.42) t = .19, $p = .85$]. Further, the obvious religious appeal alone heightened negative emotional response [control (.09) vs. obvious (.12) t = 1.98, $p<.05$; vs. multivocal (.11) t = 1.21, $p = .23$). The overall effect of the manipulation was significant for positive emotions, but not significant for negative emotions (positive emotions: F = 5.40, 2 df, $p < .01$; negative emotions: F = 1.87, 2 df, $p = .15$). The emotional reactions analysis shows that an obvious religious appeal carries some risks. As expected, a casual reference to church did not fully alienate potential voters, but it did cause them to be more reserved in their emotional reactions—they expressed lower levels of positive emotions, higher levels of negative emotions. The multivocal religious reference did not cost the candidate in the same way.

Analysis of trait assessments yields similar results. People were less likely to view the candidate as possessing positive traits when he made an obvious religious appeal, while the multivocal religious appeal had no effect [control (.54) vs. obvious (.46) t = 3.41, $p < .01$; vs. multivocal (.51) t = 1.15, $p = .25$]. The obvious religious appeal also caused heightened negative trait assessments while the multivocal appeal did not (control (.15) vs. obvious (.20) t = 2.10, $p < .05$; vs. multivocal (.18) t = 1.27, $p = .21$). Again, the overall effect of the experimental manipulation is significant for positive trait assessments, but not for negative trait assessments (positive trait assessments: F = 5.77, 2 df, $p < .01$; negative trait assessments: F = 2.08, 2df, $p = .13$).[24]

These results support the hypotheses that multivocal religious language would go over the heads of many people and would not affect their evaluations of the candidate. These findings also point to a potential cost to an obvious religious appeal. It is worth noting that the religious appeal was fairly mild—the appeal was not tied to a specific policy goal and does not clearly favor one religion over another, and still the politician was punished. Perhaps a mention of church attendance in the context of a longer speech would not be as off-putting. In a brief ad, a politician has the opportunity to say a few sentences and the fact this candidate mentioned church might convey great importance. Without overstating the political costs of religious expression, these results can be used to examine the dynamics behind punishing a politician for religious speech.

Who is penalizing the candidate for the obviously religious appeal? I hypothesize that religious appeals alienate a subset of the population: either those who do not

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[23] Cronbach's ∝ for each scale: positive emotions (interested, inspired, proud) .90; negative emotions (nervous, upset) .85; positive traits (moral, knowledgeable, strong, likeable) .94; negative traits (insincere, inexperienced) .75.

[24] These effects of the experimental manipulation on emotional reactions and trait assessments are similar among the full sample (positive emotions: F = 4.60, 2 df, $p < .05$; negative emotions: F = .50, 2 df, $p = .60$; positive trait assessments: F = 5.58, 2 df, $p < .01$; negative trait assessments: F = 1.47, 2 df, $p = .23$).

identify with the religious tradition referenced, or those who object to the infusion of religion into politics in general. Importantly, these categories do not always overlap.

The sample was fairly evenly divided in terms of their preference for expressions of faith and prayer by politicians: 30 % claimed this was done too much, 36 % felt there was too little and 34 % felt that there is currently the right amount of religious expression. Among religious identifications, Baptists and Pentecostals were particularly likely to say that there is too little (61 and 67 %, respectively), while Catholics (48 %) and other Protestants (39 %) were less likely to hold that belief. The least favorable towards the use of religious language in political speech were those who don't identify with a religious denomination (61 % saying that there is "too much").

Figure 1 shows that preference for religious language in politics is related to a variety of demographic factors. Young people are less likely to want politicians to talk about faith and prayer ($\chi^2 = 19.58$, $p = .001$). Latinos and African Americans are less disapproving of religious rhetoric than whites or other racial groups ($\chi^2 = 17.75$, $p = .007$). Gender (not shown) is unrelated to this preference ($\chi^2 = 3.18$, $p = .204$), but Republicans are much more supportive of religious expression in politics than either Democrats or Independents ($\chi^2 = 62.17$, $p = .000$). Finally, religious fundamentalism is strongly related to a preference for religious expression in politics ($\chi^2 = 246.27$, $p = .000$).[25]

I hypothesize that one's feelings about the appropriateness of religious language in politics moderates the relationship between religious appeals and attitudes towards the candidate, specifically that people who express a preference for less religious discourse in politics penalize a candidate for making an obviously religious appeal. In order to test this hypothesis, I collapse the preference for religious language measure into a dichotomous measure, indicating whether the respondent tolerates religious expression (too little or about the right amount) or expresses a preference against religious language in politics (too much).[26] I model both initial impressions and willingness to vote for the candidate as a function of the experimental manipulation, a preference for less religious language in politics and the interaction between the two (See Figs. 2, 3, full results are reported in the appendix).

A preference for less religious language in politics moderates the effect of religious appeals. The interaction between experimental condition and a preference for less religious discourse in politics is significant in both models (initial impression: F = 2.60, 2 df, $p < .10$, vote intention: F = 6.78, 2 df, $p < .01$). The obvious religious appeal was not off-putting to all members of the general sample; the effect was particularly strong among people who are opposed to religious language in politics.

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[25] A preference against religious expression in politics might also moderate the effectiveness of religious appeals among Pentecostals, but the belief is too scarce to be used as a moderator. Less than 3 % of the Pentecostal sample holds this preference, while 13 % believes that there is the right amount of religious language in politics and 85 % believes that there is too little.

[26] This preference is not significantly related to experimental condition (χ^2 2.839, $p = 0.24$).
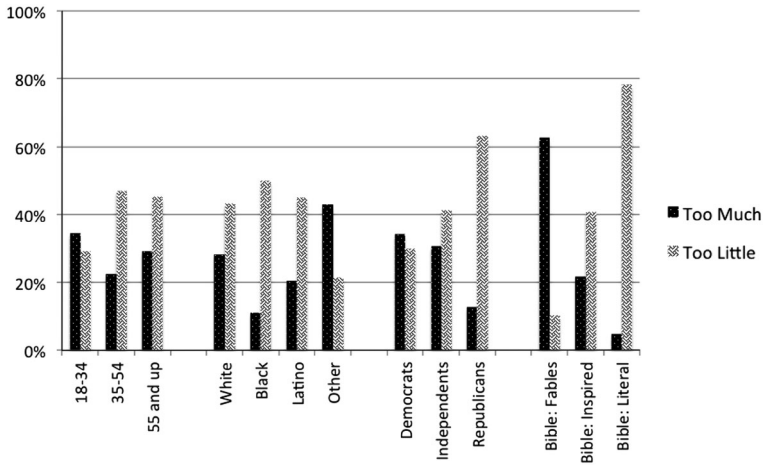
Fig. 1 Feelings about current amount of expressions of faith and prayer by politicians, general sample
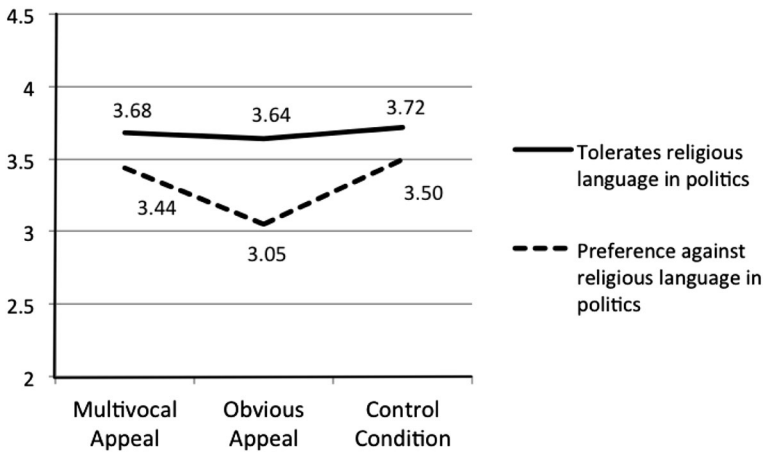

Fig. 2 Initial impression, general sample

Mechanisms Behind Religious Persuasion

Both religious appeals are persuasive among the religiously similar sample, but the obvious religious appeal was politically costly in a diverse population. The latter effect appears to be driven by a preference for less religion in political discourse. The following analysis aims to further test the mechanisms behind religious persuasion for both samples. For the general sample, a preference for less religious language in politics moderates the effectiveness of religious appeals in simple bivariate analysis, but religious similarity might also affect whether people punish or reward a politician for making a religious appeal. I test religious similarity (self
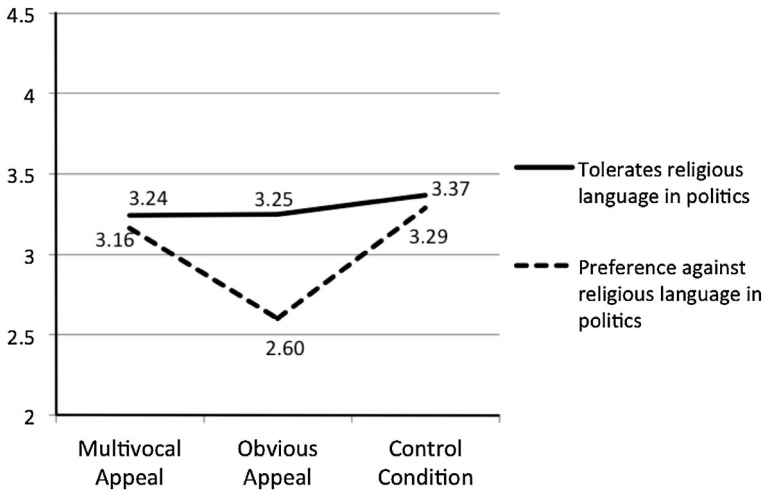
Fig. 3 Vote intention, general sample

identification as a Christian), religiosity (a 4-point scale ranging from "not at all religious" to "very religious") and a preference for religious language in politics [the full 3-point scale, ranging from "too much (religious expression)" to "too little"] as potential moderators. I also use identification with the Republican Party as a moderator given the strong association between religious movements and the Republican Party (Campbell and Monson 2008; Layman 2001). Religious appeals might cause Republicans to become more supportive of the candidate. I model initial impression and vote intention as a function of the experimental conditions interacted with religious similarity, religiosity, a preference for religious expression in politics, and identification as a Republican (see Table 1 for results from the full model and Table 2 for conditional coefficients).

Religious similarity (identification as a Christian) does not appear to moderate the effectiveness of religious appeals in the outgroup.[27] People who consider themselves to be more religious also do not find the candidate more persuasive when he makes a religious appeal. For both dependent variables, a preference for religious expression in politics moderates the effectiveness of the obvious religious appeal. It is worth noting that this relationship is significant in the obvious religious language condition and not in the multivocal condition, which further demonstrates that the religious content of the appeal eluded the outgroup. Identification as a Republican is also unrelated to the effectiveness of religious appeals in the general sample.

Finally, I test for the mechanisms behind religious persuasion with the ingroup. The previous model is adjusted to omit the religious similarity measure (the

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[27] It is possible that a narrower religious grouping would be a better measure of religious similarity. I replicated the analysis substituting Protestant for Christian identification and the results are similar (the interaction between Protestant and Obvious Religious Appeal Condition is not significant) (results not shown).

Table 1 Full interaction models for both samples

	General sample		Religious sample	
	Initial impression	Vote intention	Initial impression	Vote intention
Multivocal religious language condition	.11	.10	.57	−.53
	(.28)	(.28)	(.87)	(.81)
Obvious religious language condition	−.64**	−.98**	.95	.10
	(.26)	(.27)	(.82)	(.75)
Christian	.02	.12		
	(.17)	(.17)		
Christian * Multivocal condition	.04	−11		
	(.23)	(.23)		
Christian * Obvious condition	.13	.10		
	(.22)	(.22)		
Religiosity (general sample) Attendance (pentecostal sample)	.06	.08	.07	−.14**
	(.07)	(.07)	(.06)	(.06)
Religiosity/attendance * Multivocal condition	−.08	−.02	−.14*	.01
	(.10)	(.10)	(.08)	(.07)
Religiosity/attendance * Obvious condition	−.04	−.01	−.09	.15**
	(.10)	(.10)	(.08)	(.07)
Preference for religious expression	.06	−.02	.21	.28
	(.09)	(.09)	(.20)	(.18)
Preference for religious expression * Multivocal condition	.04	.05	.24	.19
	(.13)	(.13)	(.28)	(.26)
Preference for religious expression * Obvious condition	.25**	.33**	−.10	−.32
	(.12)	(.12)	(.27)	(.25)
Republican	.09	.05	.24	.05
	(.15)	(.15)	(.18)	(.16)
Republican * Multivocal condition	−.24	−.05	−.20	.25
	(.21)	(.21)	(.22)	(.21)
Republican * Obvious condition	−.30	−.18	.08	.34
	(.21)	(.21)	(.23)	(.21)
Constant	3.38	3.05	2.63	2.96
	(.26)	(.26)	(.67)	(.62)
Number of cases	630	630	333	332
R squared	.08	.09	.10	.10

Entries are ordinary least squares regression coefficients and standard errors. All treatments are mutually exclusive and the control condition is the excluded category. Models include controls for age, education, gender and racial group. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$ for two-tailed hypothesis tests

respondents are all Pentecostals). Also, I replace the religiosity measure with church attendance (a 6-point scale ranging from "never" to more than once a week) because attendance is a more appropriate measure of religious strength in a

Table 2 Predictors of initial impression and vote intention by experimental condition, general sample (unfamiliar with religious reference)

	Initial impression			Vote intention		
	Control condition	Multivocal religious language condition	Obvious religious language condition	Control condition	Multivocal religious language condition	Obvious religious language condition
Christian	.02	.06	.15	.12	.02	.23
	(.17)	(.16)	(.15)	(.17)	(.16)	(.15)
Religiosity	.06	−.02	.02	.08	.06	.08
	(.07)	(.08)	(.07)	(.07)	(.08)	(.07)
Preference for religious expression	.06	.11	.31**	−.02	−.07	.32**
	(.09)	(.09)	(.08)	(.09)	(.09)	(.08)
Republican	.09	−.15	−.21	.05	.10	−.14
	(.15)	(.15)	(.15)	(.15)	(.15)	(.15)
Number of cases	199	202	229	199	202	229

Entries are OLS coefficients from a single model (see Table 1) that also includes controls for age, education, gender and racial group. Each columns display conditional coefficients and standard errors, calculated according to Brambor et al. 2006. ** $p < .05$, * $p < .10$

Table 3 Predictors of initial impression and vote intention by experimental condition, religious sample (familiar with religious reference)

	Initial impression			Vote intention		
	Control condition	Multivocal religious language condition	Obvious religious language condition	Control condition	Multivocal religious language condition	Obvious religious language condition
Church attendance	.07	−.07	−.02	−.14	−.13	.01
	(.06)	(.05)	(.05)	(.06)	(.05)	(.05)
Preference for religious expression	.21	.45*	.11	.29	.47*	−.03
	(.20)	(.20)	(.18)	(.18)	(.19)	(.17)
Republican	.24	.04	.32*	.05	.30*	.38*
	(.18)	(.18)	(.18)	(.16)	(.16)	(.17)
Number of cases	116	114	107	116	114	107

Entries are OLS coefficients from a single model (see Table 1) that also includes controls for age, education, gender and racial group. Each columns display conditional coefficients and standard errors, calculated according to Brambor et al. 2006. ** $p < .05$, * $p < .10$

religiously homogenous sample, and because the measure captures more variation. 52 % of the sample reports that they attend "more than once a week," while 70 % self-identifies as "very religious" (and 96 % identify as either "somewhat" or "very religious") (Table 3).

As in the general sample, religious strength does not moderate the effectiveness of religious appeals. Interestingly, a preference for religious expression is positively related to both a positive impression of the candidate and willingness to vote for the candidate, but only when he makes a multivocal religious appeal. A religious mechanism behind persuasion in the multivocal condition is further evidence that the appeal was understood as religious by this group, but the difference between the multivocal and obvious conditions here is curious. When religious content is available to all, the ingroup's feelings about the appropriate place for religion in politics do not matter, but their normative concerns matter for multivocal appeals. Religious expression is also particularly persuasive for Republicans in the religiously similar sample. Both multivocal and obvious religious appeals made Republicans more willing to vote for the candidate, while only the obvious religious appeal affected Republicans' impression of the candidate. In this religious community, it appears that religious language cues partisanship. The effectiveness of religious appeals among Republicans in this study complements Calfano and Djupe's (2008) finding on partisanship. In their study, a student sample of mainline and evangelical Protestants viewed a candidate who said "wonder-working power" as more Republican than a candidate who didn't have a religious appeal. Across different samples and measures, both studies show a relationship between multivocal religious appeals and the Republican Party.

How much is too much when it comes to religious expression in politics? These studies, which rely on a single manipulation of religious expression, are not well designed to help answer this question. Additionally, the impact of religious appeals likely varies depending on whether it's featured in a brief advertisement or situated in a longer speech. Certainly some politicians seem more skilled at delivering religious appeals than others (compare George W. Bush or Bill Clinton to John McCain, for instance). And, some audiences are more receptive to religious appeals as was show in the current studies. This research also points to a strong role for normative beliefs over the desirability of religious language in politics. There is still much work to be done on the mechanisms of religious persuasion. These studies show that religious appeals can reach target audiences through multivocal appeals, and when they do, they are particularly persuasive.

Discussion

The two main goals in these studies were to demonstrate the effectiveness of multivocal communication that relies on specificity and to explore the mechanisms behind religious persuasion. Grouping the major findings by sample, both multivocal and obvious religious appeals persuade the ingroup. In the religiously similar sample, people were more willing to vote for a candidate and had a better impression of a candidate when he made a religious appeal. Religious appeals also

elicited heightened positive emotional reactions and trait assessments. This study experimentally manipulated the religious content of a political appeal to a religious audience, and as such, it provided an opportunity to explore the mechanisms behind religious persuasion. It seems possible that more religious people (measured through a self report of religiosity or church attendance) would be more likely to be persuaded by a religious appeal. This was not the case. Instead, religious rhetoric caused Republicans to form a better impression of the candidate and improved willingness to vote for the candidate. This experimental evidence fits with other scholarly accounts of the relationship between Christianity in politics and the Republican Party.

The outgroup was a national sample of people with diverse religious backgrounds. They were unfamiliar with the religious connotations of the phrase "wonder-working power." This sample helped establish that a political appeal can be religiously multivocal. This group did not develop more negative attitudes towards the candidate when he made the multivocal appeal (as they did in the obvious condition). They also did not call upon any religious predispositions when evaluating the candidate in either the control or the multivocal conditions. The multivocal appeal, which persuaded the ingroup, was imperceptible to the outgroup. The other major finding from this work is that attitudes about the appropriateness of religious language in politics explain people's reactions to the speeches, while religious identification does not. Identification with a Christian religion, or more specifically with a Protestant religion, does not moderate the effect of the experimental manipulation (full results available upon request). This finding suggests that the effectiveness of religious rhetoric is not simply rooted in shared faiths, but rather that religious faith is imperfectly related to attitudes over the desirability of religious discourse in politics, and that these preferences help explain whether a religious appeal is persuasive, tolerated, or politically dangerous. Some voters, in particular voters who disapprove of religious language in politics will punish a politician who makes obviously religious appeals. However, a politician who relies on a multivocal version of a religious appeal persuades the ingroup without risking this punishment.

Conclusion

Strategic politicians can code their communications by making multivocal appeals, relying on references with narrow cultural resonance. This paper establishes the distinctiveness of this form of targeted communication and demonstrates its effectiveness in political communication. While this article demonstrated the phenomenon through religious appeals, dog-whistle politics is a broader concept. These appeals rely on shared cultural knowledge and perhaps clever phrasing. As this research demonstrates, this type of targeted appeal can successfully navigate a heterogeneous audience. The religious content can elude the outgroup and reach the target audience without relying on selective exposure. Language with meanings that can bypass those most hostile to their message might be particularly strategic in an

age when a proliferation of media outlets compete to break stories and politicians cannot count on their targeted message staying with their targeted audience.

The political effectiveness of these appeals has normative implications. It clearly troubles some political commentators and even a former Bush Administration official. Regarding their use of religious dog whistles, Kuo writes, "This *should* have been driving me nuts. It should have offended me far more than anything President Clinton or the Democrats were doing. We were bastardizing God's word for our own political agenda and feeling good about it" (p. 61). While a thorough normative evaluation of these appeals is beyond the scope of this article, several factors complicate the issue. First, in a country with cultural pluralism, some multivocal communication of this sort is inevitable. A diverse population cannot be expected to understand everyone's references, and speakers cannot always anticipate which references will go over the heads of their audience. Also, speaking to a group in language that resonates with them is strategic, but it might also be genuine. Michael Gerson, a speechwriter for President George W. Bush, responded to criticism for religious dog whistles by saying: "They're not code words; they're our culture," he said. "It's not a code word when I put a reference to T.S. Eliot's 'Four Quartets' in our Whitehall speech [in London on Nov. 19, 2003]; it's a literary reference. Just because some people don't get it doesn't mean it's a plot or a secret" (quoted in Cooperman 2004, p 6).

However, the Dred Scott example leads to a second argument that shapes my normative concerns over multivocal communication in politics: these references can allow a politician to communicate a policy commitment to an ingroup, in front of an oblivious outgroup. Politics around abortion are contentious, and a politician can choose to avoid talking about the issue. However, multivocal communication makes this omission selective, because outsiders are not equipped to even hear the message. They do not know that a contentious issue was invoked and therefore cannot respond. Goodin and Saward (2005) argue that dog-whistle politics undermine policy mandates. These two ideas, the inevitability of multivocal communication and the potential policy implications, suggest to me that its proper role in a democracy is complicated and that it warrants further scholarly attention. The Dred Scott reference did appear in the press, along with the wonder-working power reference, as did each reference that appears in this article. Though the reports rarely make it beyond blogs, it is clear that some people are looking, and the more mainstream media could pick up on the stories. Still, it is unclear whether publicity after the fact takes away the initial power of the multivocal reference; not everyone will hear the obvious version, and if they do, they may not be motivated to change their initial evaluation. Also, particularly well-crafted targeted messages will be difficult to detect, and from the outside, it is impossible to know just how much multivocal communication is taking place.

Appendix

Appendix 1: Question Wording

Initial Impression Is your initial impression of Mike Reynolds negative or positive? (5 point scale: very negative, somewhat negative, neither negative nor positive, somewhat positive, very positive)

Vote If he were running for Congress in your district, how likely would you be to vote for Mike Reynolds? (5 point scale: very unlikely, somewhat unlikely, neither likely nor unlikely, somewhat likely, very likely)

Emotional Reactions We're interested into what extent Mike Reynolds makes you feel each of the following emotions. Based on your initial impression does Mike Reynolds make you feel: (5 point scale: not at all, slightly, a moderate amount, quite a bit, extremely)

Interested, upset, inspired, nervous, proud

Trait Measures Please give your initial impression of Mike Reynolds:

In your opinion, how well does each of the following traits describe Reynolds: (5 point scale: not at all, slightly, a moderate amount, quite a bit, extremely)

Likeable, moral, knowledgeable, insincere, strong leader, inexperienced

Preference for Religious Expression Do you think there has been too much, too little, or about the right amount of expressions of religious faith and prayer by political leaders? (Too much, Too little, About the right amount)

Religiosity Would you say that currently, you are: (Not at all religious, slightly religious, somewhat religious, very religious)

Church Attendance How often do you attend religious services? (Never, once a year or less, a few times a year, once or twice a month, once a week, more than once a week).

Appendix 2: Full ANOVA results

Study 1: Pentecostal sample

	Multivocal	Obvious	Control	F	$p > F$
Initial impression	3.94	3.73	3.47	9.60	.00
Vote	3.51	3.42	3.27	2.82	.06
Positive emotions	.46	.44	.37	3.42	.03
Negative emotions	.07	.08	.05	1.97	.14
Positive traits	.57	.55	.47	5.94	.00
Negative traits	.15	.20	.16	1.63	.20

$N = 338$

Study 2: General sample

	Multivocal	Obvious	Control	F	$p > F$
Initial impression	3.61	3.44	3.66	3.66	.03
Vote	3.21	3.03	3.35	6.84	.00
Positive emotions	.42	.35	.42	5.40	.00
Negative emotions	.11	.12	.09	1.87	.15
Positive traits	.51	.46	.54	5.77	.00
Negative traits	.18	.20	.15	2.08	.13

$N = 630$

Interaction Models

	Initial impression		Vote intention	
	F	p value	F	p value
Condition	4.84	.01	10.23	.00
Preference against religious language in politics	20.69	.00	12.41	.00
Interaction: condition × preference against religious language in politics	2.60	.07	6.78	.00
N	630		630	
R^2	.05		.07	

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