

How parties shape their relationship with social groups: A roadmap to the study of group-based appeals

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Abstract

In recent scholarship, there has been a renewed interest in how political parties try to associate themselves with social groups when communicating with voters. However, the numerous studies on this topic employ different terms and definitions to describe and measure appeals to social groups, resulting in a lack of clarity, difficulties in comparability, and a limited understanding of the phenomenon. In this article, we first provide an overview of the literature, comparing the concepts and terminology used in the various studies. Building on this, we propose a unified approach to the definition of group-based appeals. This, we argue, will improve the understanding of group-based appeals via a coherent vocabulary and enhance scholars' ability to engage in comparative studies. Based on our proposed conceptual and terminological approach, we conclude the article by outlining a research plan for the empirical investigation of group-based appeals and their effects on voters.

Keywords

social groups, group appeals, group targeting, political parties, political communication.

Introduction

Social identities and attitudes toward different groupings in society are an essential prism through which voters perceive the political world (Achen and Bartels 2016; Huddy 2003). This lens enables ordinary citizens to interpret and process real-world complexity by means of categorization into social groups. In fact, classic sociological theories of party system formation saw social groups at the heart of political life (Duverger 1954; Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Sartori 1969), and they remain influential for the study of both party politics and voter behavior (Caramani, Celis, and Wauters 2014; Evans and Tilley 2017; Tilley 2014). Because these collective identities and group attitudes continually structure politics, parties employ various approaches to express their connection to these groups and to portray themselves (and others) as either allies or opponents of a particular group and its members.

Many studies have examined these approaches, typically focusing on one specific group and/or one particular form of appeal (e.g., Hersh and Schaffner 2013; Holman, Schneider, and Pondel 2015; Nteta and Schaffner 2013; Rhodes and Johnson 2015; Thau 2019). However, one would be hard-pressed to identify the common conceptual core of these diverse studies because they use different terminology and concepts, at times without providing concrete definitions for what seems to be the same phenomenon. Such terminological and conceptual variation challenges our ability to gain a comprehensive understanding of group-based appeals, especially from a comparative perspective, as it is not clear whether different studies indeed examine the same phenomenon.

To better understand the different ways in which parties and candidates can shape their relationships with social groups through expressions of connection (or disconnection), we first discuss the state of the art and the challenges posed by the diversity of concepts and terminology. Next, we address the identified challenges by proposing a coherent definition for group-based appeals as a multidimensional concept. This definition encompasses various types of acts that parties can employ to associate themselves directly or indirectly with particular social groups, including statements, party branding, candidate nominations, language and dialect, endorsements, symbols, and policies. The aim is to provide conceptual and terminological clarity through a novel, comprehensive definition and unified terminology. This allows us to situate existing studies in a common space which facilitates the accumulation of knowledge over time and space and to create a roadmap for future research.

The study of group-based appeals by political actors is of paramount importance because social groups play a crucial role in the broader political landscape. It is not only about understanding the various ways in which political actors reach out to specific social groups and thereby connect voters to the government but also about capturing the effects that extend beyond party dynamics. When political behavior centers around group affinities rather than solely around party identity or programmatic preferences, it challenges our traditional perception of party electoral bases and the role of social groups in political competition. Additionally, it broadens our perspective to include the diverse interests and preferences of the citizenry. Therefore, the study of group-based appeals delves into the core of the representative linkage between parties and citizens.

The study of appeals to social groups

Over the years, numerous studies have examined different aspects relating to the question of how parties express their association with distinct social groups. To gain a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon, we must first define what constitutes a social group. Thus far, there is no consensus on this question in the existing literature. In some studies, the concept comprises organizations such as trade unions or businesses (e.g., Thau 2018, 2019), while in others, it includes groupings based on party affiliation or political opinions (e.g., Rhodes and Johnson 2015). In still others, “the people,” “everyone,” or “all” are also considered social groups (e.g., Horn et al. 2021). The main challenge in defining this concept stems from the mixing of different types of societal groupings (organized vs. non-organized) and different bases of belonging.

On the one hand, we have institutionalized organizations such as interest groups, business entities, and state authorities (e.g., police, military, schools, or trade unions), which are clearly distinct from the individuals who compose them (e.g., police officers, soldiers, teachers, or workers). On the other hand, we have groupings based on party affiliation (e.g., the Social Democrats or the Greens) and/or political ideology (e.g., Conservatives or Liberals), which are characterized by shared ideological orientations, political views, or opinions on certain issues. These groupings are especially voluntary and have relatively low exit costs; thus, they differ from groupings based on shared sociodemographic traits, which are predominantly non-voluntary and/or have high exit costs (Ritchie 2015).

We define a social group as a segment of society or a collection of people who share common sociodemographic traits. These attributes encompass both ascriptive and acquired characteristics, such as sex and gender, age, ethnicity, religion, place of residence, nationality, income, occupation, or education. By focusing on one common basis for clustering people into social groups, we adopt a more coherent approach to the concept. While we maintain the conceptual boundaries by excluding institutionally organized groups and state authorities, we include groupings of individuals within such organizations. Additionally, while a stronger argument could be made to also include groupings based on shared beliefs, ideology, party affiliation, and/or political opinion, we argue that these are inherently distinct from groupings based on shared sociodemographic traits.

Second, it is important to define what an appeal to a social group is. Here, too, the diverse literature exploring the different aspects of this phenomenon employs a variety of concepts, definitions, and terminology. Some studies provide clear conceptual definitions of distinct concepts to describe parties' appeals to social groups (e.g., Thau 2019), while others seem to examine the same phenomenon but either use different terms (e.g., Holman, Schneider, and Pondel 2015) or do not (clearly) name the concept at all (e.g., Heinisch and Werner 2019; Lamont, Park, and Ayala-Hurtado 2017). Further still, we also find inconsistency across studies in the definitions of the terms group-based appeal and group appeal, as well as of the term targeting and related concepts.

This terminological diversity and these disparate conceptual definitions pose challenges to accumulating knowledge and conducting comparative research. Without a clear

definition and shared understanding of what constitutes a group(-based) appeal, scholars may use this term to refer to different aspects of party behavior and strategies. This causes confusion and hinders our ability to pool data and gain a broad understanding of this phenomenon. Some may understand it as parties making claims to represent certain social groups, while others might conceptualize it as parties targeting their campaign messages toward specific groups or proposing policies that benefit particular constituencies. While related to one another, these are inherently different aspects, as we discuss below. The lack of clarity in the definition of group appeals impedes meaningful comparisons and systematic analyses across studies and, thereby, our ability to identify patterns, trends, and variations in party strategies and their interactions with different social groups.

Given the growing interest in this phenomenon and the evidence from recent studies that group appeals are widely used in parties' communication with voters (Horn et al. 2021; Stuckelberger and Tresch 2022; Thau 2023), there is a pressing need for greater conceptual clarity on how parties relate to social groups. This clarity will enable researchers to establish common frameworks and measurement approaches, enhancing the accuracy and reliability of empirical studies. Moreover, by aligning definitions and operationalizations, we enable scholars to conduct more consistent and valid studies. This, in turn, improves the robustness of comparisons and accumulation of knowledge and increases our understanding of this phenomenon across time and space. The following section reviews the state of the art and discusses the similarities and differences in conceptual and terminological usage.

Group(-based) appeals and appeals to groups

Existing studies on the relationship between social groups and political parties—i.e., the extent to which a particular group supports a party or the extent to which a party's votes come disproportionately from a particular group—have mainly focused on parties' policy stances as an explanatory factor. For example, the political choice theory (Evans and Tilley 2012) assumes that members of different social classes have distinct policy preferences. Consequently, the relationship between voters' social positions and their electoral choices depends on the policies offered by the parties. When parties present clear policy alternatives, the association between social position and party support increases. In contrast, if parties converge in their policy positions, the differences in party choice between the social groups decline. Another example is the study by Abou-Chadi and Wagner (2019), who argue that mainstream left parties can appeal to growing electoral groups, such as sociocultural professionals and highly skilled workers, who favor increases in spending on education, child care, or active labor market policies as well as the promotion of gender equality and self-expression, by promoting investment-oriented economic positions as well as liberal cultural policy positions.

Some studies have shifted their focus away from policy to appeals to social groups but do not refer to them as a distinct concept. For example, analyzing Donald Trump's election campaign speeches, Lamont et al. (2017) examine how he appealed to the white working class by positively and negatively addressing different social groups in his political rhetoric. Similarly, Heinisch and Werner (2019) investigate which social groups the Austrian FPÖ and the German AfD claim to represent in their election manifestos by also

analyzing references to societal groups. Additional studies, such as Howe et al. (2022) and Szöcsik et al. (2023), and earlier works, such as Evans and Tilley (2017), Stoll (2010) and Dickson and Scheve (2006), do refer to a similar phenomenon as group appeals and group-based appeals but do not discuss its conceptual definition.

Other studies that focus on appeals to specific social groups rather than the more generalized concept of group appeals also use a variety of different terms. These include analyses of racial appeals (Christiani 2023; Stephens-Dougan 2021), ethnic appeals (Fox 2023; Gadjanova 2015), gendered appeals (Kam, Archer, and Geer 2017; Sanders, Gains, and Annesley 2021; Schaffner 2005), religious appeals (Albertson 2015; Weber and Thornton 2012), and class appeals (Robison et al. 2021). Within this scholarship, however, some studies that use the same terminology examine aspects different from social group mentions, such as policy issues (Gadjanova 2015; Schaffner 2005) or a combination of multiple strategies (Fox 2023; Nteta and Schaffner 2013).

Furthermore, we find other similar studies that examine how parties may appeal to social groups via means other than statements, such as the selection of candidates with certain backgrounds or characteristics (Heath 2015; Weeks et al. 2023), endorsements from interest groups or organizations that are close to a group (Arceneaux and Kolodny 2009; Grossman and Helpman 1999; McDermott 2006), use of specific language or dialect (Alamillo and Collingwood 2017; Chandra 2011), use of symbols or visual images (Dietrich and Hayes 2023; Fox 2023; Holman, Schneider, and Pondel 2015; Mendelberg 2001), or party branding, such as the name (Chandra 2011). However, such acts are not usually referred to as group appeals.

Adding to the conceptual and terminological diversity, a related branch of research examining voter targeting often uses the term group targeting interchangeably with the term group appeal. For example, Rhodes and Johnson (2015, 4) use the terms group targeting and targeted group appeals, which are defined as “messages that explicitly reference particularistic (as opposed to general/universal) group identities.” Relatedly, Holman et al. (2015, 816) examine identity-based targeting, defined as “a candidate’s efforts to appeal to voters’ affective attachments to their politicized social groups.” Here again, we find concepts that describe a similar phenomenon to the ones explained above but under a different name.

Moreover, studies that focus on targeting also use a variety of definitions, including both explicit references to particularistic group identities (similar to the studies discussed above) and processes of identifying and disseminating messages to specific groups. The latter meaning of targeting is, for example, implicitly employed in studies such as Nteta and Schaffner (2013).¹ Thus, scholars apply the terms target and appeal to denote different things, adding to the terminological confusion. The lack of consensus on whether targeting refers specifically to group mentions, group-specific dissemination of messages, or both poses yet another challenge for researchers seeking to analyze political communication strategies in a coherent manner.

¹ To be sure, there are many more studies focusing on (micro-)targeting, as well as other adjacent topics, but since they are not related to social groups, they are outside the scope of our interest for this paper.

Within this conceptual and terminological confusion over the phenomenon of appeals to social groups, recent studies have made efforts to provide distinct definitions for the concept of social group appeals and investigate their use across different parties, countries, and communication channels (Dolinsky 2023; Horn et al. 2021; Huber 2022; Stuckelberger and Tresch 2022; Thau 2019). These studies, however, still diverge both conceptually and in the terminology used.

Thau (2019, 65) defines group-based appeals as “explicit statements that link a political party to some category of people”; Stuckelberger and Tresch (2022, 5) as “explicitly stated support (positive group appeals) or criticism of group categories (negative group appeals) by parties or candidates”; and Dolinsky (2023, 1131) as “explicitly stated support of some social group category(ies).” In these two latter studies, group-based appeals constitute the larger category left undefined in itself, and group appeal is supposedly one specific subtype of group-based appeal. Moreover, Thau’s (2019) group-based appeals are conceptually the same as Stuckelberger and Tresch’s (2022), and it is therefore not clear if and how Thau’s concept relates to other methods used by parties to appeal to groups. Thus, the existing definitions acknowledge that group-based appeals or appeals to groups extend beyond the mere mention of groups in statements, but the definitions narrowly center on (positive or negative) statements alone, failing to connect them to other ways parties may appeal to social groups. In fact, no study to date clearly defines the larger category of appeals to social groups under which we may find group(-based) appeals as referring to statements alone. In this respect, existing definitions are simultaneously overly discriminatory and not discriminatory enough.

Explicit/implicit and positive/negative group appeals

In addition to the problems just highlighted, it is important to address two other sets of attributes that are integral to existing definitions: explicit/implicit or positive/negative. The distinction between positive and negative appeals touches on the tone or stance of the appeal, with “positive” referring to a supportive position toward the social group and “negative” referring to a critical position. The differentiation between explicit and implicit appeals refers to the identifiability of the referenced group in the appeal, with “explicit” unambiguously displaying the referenced social group and “implicit” leaving the referenced social group ambiguous. However, the inclusion of “explicit” alongside both positive and negative mentions in the definition of group(-based) appeals in Thau (2019) and Stuckelberger and Tresch (2022) results in an internally incoherent concept and creates confusion.

First, the term negative appeal contains an innate contradiction—an appeal is inherently positive and does not reconcile with a negative act. Therefore, we ought to be mindful of what it is about the appeal that constitutes the negative aspect. An appeal can contain criticism of or take a negative position toward a given social group, but it is then logical to argue that the group being appealed to is not the one toward which the negative stance is taken. That is:

when parties state support of some religious group (i.e., positive appeals), say Catholics, it stands to reason that they are *explicitly* [italics not in original] appealing to Catholics. But, when parties state opposition to the same religious group (i.e., negative appeals), they are not appealing to Catholics. So which social group are they appealing to? (Dolinsky 2023, 1131)

Second, as discussed above, the term explicit appeal is also problematic because an appeal can be explicit in different ways. It can be explicit if it clearly indicates which social group it is referring to, say by overtly naming the social group in a statement, which can then take either a positive or negative position toward the group. In the former case, it is straightforward to discern who is being appealed to—“We support workers” or “We are the party of immigrants” are quite clearly supportive appeals to workers and immigrants, respectively. In the latter case, however, we circle back to the issue just discussed—when a negative position is taken toward a social group, it is not immediately clear which social group is being appealed to. For example, an explicit appeal that overtly names and criticizes immigrants or the wealthy is logically not aimed at attracting the support of those groups. Moreover, an appeal can also be implicit in different ways. For example, it could comprise “dog whistle” statements or vaguely refer to some social group in either a positive or negative way, further increasing the need to interpret which social group is being appealed to.

Both sets of attributes capture relevant aspects of the concept but are not clearly explained in current definitions: the tone/stance of the appeal (supportive or critical), whether a social group is overtly referenced or not (explicit or implicit), and crucially, whether the referenced group is the social group that is being appealed to. Especially the last of these aspects has thus far been insufficiently considered in existing conceptualizations.

Thus, while the efforts discussed in the previous sections make important and valuable contributions to the study of group(-based) appeals, we contend that more conceptual work is needed to improve our understanding of appeals to social groups as a distinct

concept. In what follows, we contribute to this effort by proposing a unified conceptual definition and a clarification of terminology. Our aim is to facilitate the development of research on appeals to social groups in a more cohesive way and improve our understanding of this phenomenon and its manifestation in the political arena.

A unified concept and terminology

The key to a coherent conceptualization of appeals to social groups is to distinguish between two elements that may or may not coincide. The first element is the group-specific content or substance of an appeal. It is both a necessary and sufficient condition for an appeal to be considered a group appeal. The second element is the group-specific dissemination of an appeal (to whom or how the appeal is communicated). On its own, it is neither necessary nor sufficient for an appeal to be considered a group appeal, although it may be used in connection with a group appeal to enhance parties' efforts to signal their appeal.

Based on this distinction and following Sartori's (1970) advice to create conceptual structures that order observational terms along a ladder of abstraction, we focus on group-based appeals, which are defined as an intentional act that associates a political actor with a social group. In doing so, we emphasize the content or substance of the appeal and use the term group-based appeal as the umbrella category under which we subsume various types of acts that meet the definitional criteria. Importantly, this definition does not exclude "hidden" acts, such as the use of dog whistles. However, the essential criterion remains: a group-based appeal must inherently contain group-specific content, ensuring

that it is recognized as an appeal to the group at which it is directed. If an appeal is so well hidden that it cannot be recognized as an appeal to a specific social group, it is not a group-based appeal. We elaborate on this below.

In addition to defining group-based appeals, we propose to use the categorizations direct vs. indirect as descriptors to evaluate group-based appeals, capturing all three aspects discussed above: the tone/stance of the appeal, whether a social group is overtly referenced or not (explicit or implicit), and whether the referenced group is the social group that is being appealed to.

We characterize group-based appeals as direct if the mentioned group is also the group that is being appealed to. When a party secures the endorsement of a tenants' association, incorporates a social group such as workers into its name or campaign slogan, or proposes policies such as extending parental leave for mothers and fathers, we can confidently say that these are direct appeals to tenants, workers, and parents, respectively. When a party releases its manifesto or campaign ads in multiple languages, including those spoken by distinct minority groups, it is reasonable to infer that those groups who speak a certain language are being appealed to. Similarly, advocating for an increase in the minimum wage can be seen as a direct appeal to low-income earners, even without explicitly naming this group. Hence, the tone of such group-based appeals would be supportive of the social group, and the social group can be either explicitly or implicitly referenced in the appeal.

When a group-based appeal is indirect, the social group that is either explicitly or implicitly mentioned is not the social group to which the party is appealing. Instead, these

appeals are characterized by critical (or negative) stances toward a given social group and are used by the party to indirectly associate itself with another group, usually the rival or opposer of the criticized group. For example, when a party criticizes the rich, immigrants, or trade unions (which scholars would classify as a negative appeal), it is reasonable to say that the party is not appealing to the rich, immigrants, or workers. While one can guess from prior knowledge which social group is likely to be appealed to here, and this intuition may at times be straightforward, the interpretation effort required is higher for indirect than for direct group-based appeals.

Another example of an indirect group-based appeal is when political actors strategically (dis-) associate another party or candidate with a social group as a means of negative campaigning. The subject of such statements is undoubtedly the rival party or candidate, and the primary objective is to undermine their standing or reputation. However, a nuanced interpretation reveals that these maneuvers also involve a form of association or disassociation with a particular social group. Whether by emphasizing potentially unpopular affiliations or discrediting rivals by disassociating them from popular social groups, this deliberate attempt to create a connection between the rival and the social group is, at its core, an indirect appeal that also links the attacking party to the social group.

Our proposed definition, with the additional distinction between direct and indirect appeals, provides a coherent and internally consistent concept with which political actors' efforts to associate themselves with social groups can be captured. Acknowledging the challenges associated with the categorizations of explicit/implicit and positive/negative,

we establish a more robust framework for comprehending the diverse acts that fall under the umbrella of group-based appeals. This framework not only enhances the precision in classification but also enables a better understanding of the intricate nature of political communication strategies.

Drawing on Chandra's (2011) conceptualization of ethnic parties and incorporating other additional aspects found in the reviewed studies above, Table 1 identifies a variety of acts parties and candidates may employ as direct or indirect group-based appeals:²

Table 1: Acts by political actors that constitute a group-based appeal.

	Direct appeals	Indirect appeals
Statements	Making public statements in support of, endorsement of, and/or lobbying for specific social groups.	Making public statements to express criticism or rejection of specific groups.
Party branding	Creating a distinct branding (with names, slogans, and logos) to link the party with specific social groups.	Creating a distinct branding to distance the party from particular social groups.
Nominations	Nominating candidates with certain backgrounds or characteristics that connect them with specific groups.	Prohibiting the nomination of candidates with specific backgrounds or from certain groups.
Language and dialect	Using language, slang, or expressions connected to specific groups or employing a vernacular or regional dialect.	Criticizing the use of language, slang, or expressions, as well as dialects linked to a specific group.
Endorsements	Seeking endorsements from interest groups and/or organizations that are close to certain groups.	Rejecting endorsements from organizations and/or interest groups connected to particular social groups.
Symbols	Employing specific symbols, symbolic visuals, actions, or	Condemning symbols or the use of symbols associated with specific groups.

² While we continuously refer to political parties as collective political actors performing these acts, most of these acts can also be performed by individual actors, such as politicians or candidates.

	language to associate the party with certain groups.	
Policies	Supporting policies that benefit specific social groups or opposing policies that hurt certain social groups.	Supporting policies that harm specific social groups.

Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the variety of theoretically possible acts, not all of which would actually be observed in the real world. While we assume that many of these acts have been performed by parties over time and in different countries, and this has also been observed in previous studies (as discussed above), their usage may be highly dependent on the temporal and spatial context. Below, we provide some concrete examples to illustrate how parties may employ different acts of appealing to distinct social groups:

- Ethnic or racial groups: Political candidates may highlight their own ethnic or racial background to establish a sense of shared identity and representation; they may attend important community events, use a specific language or dialect that is used by a particular community, criticize other ethnic groups that are in conflict with the ethnic group being appealed to or use dog-whistle rhetoric to fuel conflict.
- Gender and sexuality groups: Appealing to these groups can involve nominating female candidates or LGBTQ+ individuals, using inclusive and gender-sensitive language, and promoting policies related to gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights. Candidates may also engage in public demonstrations of support for gender-related causes, use symbols such as the rainbow flag, or ally themselves with prominent figures and organizations of these communities.

- Religious groups: Appealing to religious groups can involve party representatives actively participating in religious ceremonies, visiting places of worship, or publicly expressing solidarity with religious communities. Parties and candidates can also advocate for distinct policies, such as religious freedom or moral issues. In contrast, sectarian parties by religious minorities may also distance themselves from specific groups, for example, by introducing specific rules for candidate selection prohibiting women from running for office.
- Socioeconomic groups: Appeals to socioeconomic groups can focus on policies related to income inequality, social justice, or tax policies that resonate with the concerns of low- or high-income groups. Parties may also declare themselves the advocates of workers by incorporating the group in the party name. Moreover, politicians can participate in related public events, seek endorsements from interest groups (such as trade unions), or highlight their own class background.
- Age groups: Appeals to generational or age groups can involve addressing the unique challenges faced by younger or older populations. For example, political actors may focus on issues such as education to connect with younger voters while emphasizing retirement security to address senior citizens. Parties can also strive to ensure a certain age representation within their own organizations, choose a party name like “The Pensioners’ Party,” or use certain language and imagery that resonates with the preferences and habits of a specific generation.

Empirically, we can observe whether parties use different types of acts described in Table 1 to associate themselves with different social groups. However, dependent on the context,

we can also interpret the avoidance of specific acts as a signal of association or disassociation. For example, if during Pride month, all but one political party try to demonstrate their solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community, avoidance may also be interpreted as a sign of disassociation from this group.

These examples illustrate how examining different types of acts allows us to understand the multifaceted nature of appeals to social groups. An encompassing conceptualization of group-based appeals acknowledges that the relationship between political parties and various social groups goes beyond policy offerings and involves connecting with specific social groups through shared identity, recognition, and the expression of their unique concerns and experiences.

Reach and visibility of group-based appeals

As we discussed above, the content or substance of an appeal is a necessary and sufficient condition to constitute a group-based appeal. However, parties could further try to influence the reception of these appeals by determining to whom and/or via which medium the appeal is communicated. In our effort to provide a unified terminology, we address this element by adopting Hersh and Schaffner's definition of targeting as "the process of identifying groups of voters based on some characteristic and sending messages to just those groups" (2013, 522 footnote 2). Thus, in our proposed framework, targeting a group-based appeal to a particular social group would involve, for example, distributing a group-specific campaign leaflet (identified as such by its content) only in neighborhoods in

which the group is concentrated or broadcasting a group-specific campaign advertisement on specific television channels (Hillygus and Shields 2008).

Targeting can enable parties to prioritize their resources and efforts by focusing on the segments of the population that are most likely to be influenced by or supportive of certain acts while excluding others who may react negatively. Here, it is important for parties to consider the media consumption habits of the social groups they wish to appeal to and the platforms on which their messages are likely to have the greatest impact. This is, of course, also strongly related to parties' control over and access to different media and communication channels. By strategically utilizing various channels, parties can increase their visibility, engage with the audience, and influence public opinion in line with their group-based communication strategies. Strategies that use channels with a wider reach, such as mainstream media (newspapers, television networks, and radio stations), have a higher potential to reach a broad audience. Other channels, such as social media, enable targeted advertising and allow parties to only reach out to specific social groups. However, traditional direct mail campaigns and canvassing can also be effective for targeting specific groups.

Importantly, as we argue above, targeting is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for an act to constitute a group-based appeal. Group-based appeals can be communicated to voters via a targeting strategy but also without it, and a party can target a given group of voters without employing any group-based appeals. For example, in pursuing a targeting strategy, a party could put up election posters only in areas in which a specific group is geographically concentrated, party campaign workers could deliver leaflets only

to specific voters, or parties could target specific groups on social media platforms. But neither the posters, the leaflets, nor the social media postings or ads must necessarily contain a group-based appeal. They could, for example, outline a party's position on specific policy issues, which may be particularly salient among a specific segment of voters, but without mentioning any benefits or harm to specific social groups. On the other hand, parties may also communicate group-based appeals to the whole public rather than target specific segments of the electorate. For example, election manifestos containing different group-based appeals are available to everyone, as is a list of candidates for an upcoming election, which may include group-specific candidates. Similar examples would be the nationwide broadcasting of a parliamentary speech by a politician in which specific groups are mentioned or a group-based campaign ad published in a national newspaper of wide circulation.

Thus, our proposed framework emphasizes that the terms targeting and group-based appeals are theoretically and analytically separated. Whether and how often group-based appeals are communicated to voters in combination with a targeting strategy are empirical questions that require additional research. While the interconnectedness and links between these two concepts are important, their study requires distinct research designs and approaches.

Group-based appeals in empirical research

By focusing on the different acts employed by parties and politicians to associate themselves with social groups, we can gain an encompassing picture of their relationship.

These acts, ranging from endorsements and policy alignment to symbolic gestures and language use, reveal the efforts of parties to build connections with or distance themselves from particular groups. Table 2 summarizes the empirical focus of the studies discussed throughout this paper according to our new definition and classification of group-based appeals.

Table 2: Classification of previous studies using our proposed definition of group-based appeals.

Article	Classification by act
Abou-Chadi and Wagner (2019)	Policies
Alamillo and Collingwood (2017)	Endorsements, language, and dialect, nominations
Albertson (2015)	Symbols
Arceneaux and Kolodny (2009)	Endorsements
Chandra (2004, 2011)	Nominations, party branding, policies, statements, symbols
Christiani (2023)	Policies, statements
Dietrich and Hayes (2023)	Symbols
Dolinsky (2023)	Party branding, statements
Evans and Tilley (2012)	Policies
Evans and Tilley (2017)	Policies
Fox (2023)	Language and dialect, statements, symbols
Gadjanova (2015)	Policies
Grossman and Helpman (1999)	Endorsements, policies
Heath (2015)	Nominations
Hersh and Schaffner (2013)	Statements
Heinisch and Werner (2019)	Nominations, statements
Holman et al. (2015)	Policies, statements
Horn et al. (2021)	Policies, statements
Howe et al. (2022)	Policies, statements

Huber (2022)	Statements
Kam et al. (2017)	Policies, statements
Lamont et al. (2017)	Statements
McDermott (2006)	Endorsements
Mendelberg (2001)	Policies statements, symbols
Nteta & Schaffner (2013)	Policies, statements, symbols
Rhodes and Johnson 2015	Policies, statements
Robison et al. (2021)	Policies, statements
Sanders et al. (2021)	Policies, statements
Schaffner (2005)	Policies
Stoll (2010)	Policies
Stuckelberger and Tresch (2022)	Statements
Szőcsik et al. (2023)	Policies, statements
Thau (2018, 2019, 2021)	Statements
Valentino et al. (2018)	Policies, symbols
Weber and Thornton (2012)	Symbols
Weeks et al. (2023)	Nominations
Zárate et al. (2024)	Language

Examining these dynamics using the concept of group-based appeals will enhance our understanding of how parties and politicians shape their public image to garner support among specific segments of the electorate. Besides clarifying the definition and terminology, we can gain important insights not only of how parties and politicians use group-based appeals but also of their multifaceted effects on voters.

First, we can focus on how parties use distinct types of group-based appeals and how contextual changes impact their nature and frequency. In existing studies, this was done, for instance, by Huber (2022), who explains the use of group-based statements with the concept of group yield. This concept summarizes the electoral potential of group-based

appeals for individual parties based on sympathy toward a group among the general electorate and party supporters. Another example includes a study by Weeks et al. (2023) that investigates how populist radical right parties use the nomination of female candidates to appeal to women voters.

For future research, it is especially relevant to look at the longitudinal evolution of group-based appeals over multiple election cycles from a comparative perspective since most existing studies either focus on long periods of time for a single country or investigate group-based appeals cross-nationally but only over short time periods. This could generate important findings about how different political systems, cultural contexts, and electoral structures shape the use of group-based appeals. In addition to that, one could undertake in-depth qualitative case studies of specific elections or political campaigns to gain a nuanced understanding of the strategies that are pursued with different types of group-based appeals. Specifically, interpretative methods offer a valuable approach to studying indirect group appeals, as they allow researchers to delve deeply into the subjective interpretations and meanings attributed to these appeals. Through techniques such as qualitative interviews and discourse analysis, scholars can uncover the underlying motivations and implications for both political actors and voters.

Second, we can also look more closely at specific combinations of various acts. For example, one could investigate how group-based statements intersect with specific policy issues and explore whether parties strategically align group-based appeals with certain policy domains. Nteta and Schaffner (2013) make the argument that the Republican Party mainly relies on symbolic outreach to minority voters because they have little to offer

these groups in terms of policy. A particularly fruitful approach to investigate the success of different combinations of group-based appeals could be to design experiments and manipulate specific elements of this mechanism, such as language, symbols, or policy proposals. This was done, for example, by Robison et al. (2021), who conducted an experimental study on the effectiveness of group mentions and policy proposals focusing on social class. They show that, regarding vote intentions, both types of appeals are equally effective. Similarly, one could investigate the interaction between the use of symbols or specific language with policy proposals and group mentions or in combination with further information on the sender of the message (party or candidate) (see, for example, Zárate, Quezada-Llanes, and Armenta 2024). Another interesting strategy in this context could involve facial electromyography (fEMG) measures (Schumacher et al. 2024) to study the affective responses of individuals when exposed to group-based appeals and to explore how emotions contribute to the effectiveness of different types of appeals.

Third, we propose that the concept of group-based appeals can also be approached as a summative index that may be used to assess the strength with which parties signal to voters their degree of association with a given group. Each individual act only shows us part of the picture, but focusing on multiple acts at once can help identify the parties that are more closely aligned with specific groups and those that are relatively disconnected across various dimensions. To do that, it is necessary to supplement the traditional content analysis of party communication with behavioral measures, such as observational data on party activities and campaign events. By triangulating data from diverse sources, researchers can enhance the reliability and validity of the summative index, capturing

nuances in parties' associations with specific groups. Public opinion data can be used to validate this summative index and assess whether the association between parties and specific groups captured by the index matches voter perceptions.

Conclusion

Appeals to social groups have gained increasing attention from scholars across various fields, including party politics, political communication, and electoral behavior. This has led to a variety of specific terminologies and different empirical indicators being used. While the existing studies from different research areas contribute valuable insights, there is a pressing need to enhance their comparability within a common scope.

To move forward and improve our understanding of this important phenomenon, it is imperative to introduce terminological and conceptual cohesion. After reviewing the literature on the various ways political parties relate to social groups, this study provided a new, comprehensive definition to bring terminological clarity and advance our understanding of this phenomenon. The term group-based appeal serves as a unifying concept that cuts across diverse literatures and encompasses a wide range of empirical phenomena. By setting out a cohesive approach, we address the confusion caused by the diverse terminology and concepts used in previous research.

Our new classification system comprises different types of acts that political actors may employ to associate themselves with social groups: statements, party branding, candidate nominations, language and dialect, endorsements, symbols, and policies. These

dimensions draw upon existing definitions in the literature but allow for a more precise conception of the strategies through which political actors try to connect themselves with social groups. Hence, our contribution lies in consolidating them into a singular classification scheme. This is crucial for future research in the field in order to facilitate greater accumulation of knowledge, enable researchers to build upon each other's work, and contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics between parties and social groups.

In addition to providing a comprehensive framework, our study points to various avenues for future research. We highlight relatively neglected aspects of this broader phenomenon and the need for further investigation into the specific strategies employed by parties as well as their combination of different group-based appeals. We also suggest that there are different ways to analyze the effectiveness of different types of appeals. Examining the varying contexts in which group-based appeals occur and the specific mechanisms through which they shape voting behavior and public opinion contributes can generate important insights for political competition.

In conclusion, this paper has made significant progress in clarifying the concept of group-based appeals and providing a roadmap for future research in this area. By establishing a common language and conceptual framework, it advances our understanding of the different ways parties connect themselves to social groups. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader goal of enhancing our knowledge of the complex interplay between politics, social groups, and voter behavior.

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