

How Voting History and Issue Type Shape Perceptions of Political Pandering

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Abstract

Politicians are often accused of pandering to groups they appeal to despite evidence that suggests politicians do not pander (Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000; Sulkin, 2009). Whether politicians pander or not likely does not matter for them electorally if voters perceive that they do and it affects voter political behavior. In this paper, I argue that perceptions of pandering are products of motivated evaluations (Taber and Lodge, 2006), and knowledge of a candidate's voting history (Simas, Milita and Ryan, 2021). People are motivated to believe that candidates from their party are sincere even when they have an inconsistent history of supporting a given issue or policy. This may not be true, however, if the candidate is inconsistent on an ideological or principled issue (Tavits, 2007). I conduct a 2x2x2 quasi-pre-post repeated measures experiment with 758 Republicans and 770 Democrats recruited from Prolific. Participants were asked to read a short news article reporting on either a Republican or Democrat politician at a campaign event. The politician was reported to either be talking about a principled or pragmatic issue and was later reported to either have a consistent or inconsistent voting record on that issue. I find evidence that politicians from the opposite party tend to be perceived as pandering and that regardless of party, politicians who have an inconsistent history on a given issue are perceived as pandering. I do not find evidence that the type of issue matters for how perceptions of pandering are formed.

I am thankful to Diana O'Brien for generously funding the experiment used for this paper and for giving insightful input during the development of this design. I would also like to thank Scott Clifford for his advice on the design of the experiment.

After clearing away protesters in front of a church and posing for a photo holding a Bible upside down, Donald Trump was accused of pandering to Christians.¹ When Joe Biden appeared in front of a group of Latinos and played “Despacito” by Justin Bieber, Joe Biden was accused of pandering to Latinos.² It seems as though every election contains some claim of a politician pandering by either the media or a group of voters. Despite the prevalence of these accusations, we know relatively little about how perceptions of political pandering are formed. Researchers have found that perceptions of a candidate’s sincerity for representing a group depend on the motivation of the candidate and whether they belong to the group they are appealing to (McGraw, Lodge and Jones, 2002). The types of issues that a candidate talks about while campaigning and how they execute their appeal also seem to matter for general candidate evaluations (Burge, Wamble and Laird, 2020; Zárate, Quezada-Llanes and Armenta, 2021). Candidates who do not vote consistently with the position they take on cultural issues are more likely to be perceived as lacking integrity (Simas, Milita and Ryan, 2021; Tavits, 2007). This earlier research tells us that citizens do make evaluations about a candidate’s sincerity and character but not whether or how that translates to perceptions of political pandering.

Voters want a representative who they believe will sincerely represent their interests. When a politician is accused of pandering, the accuser is assuming that the politician is only appealing to the group to earn their votes instead of appealing because they sincerely want to represent their interests. This is the definition of pandering that I adopt for this project, the perception of pandering is that the politician is using a disingenuous explicit appeal toward a group that the politician views as necessary for election. For example, when the former member of Congress, Beto O’Rourke ran for President of the United States he was accused

¹See the following article for more details on the event: https://enewspaper.latimes.com/infinity/article_share.aspx?guid=9d35b4f1-b080-4d05-ae9c-b783f152371e

²See this article for details: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/09/16/biden-plays-despacito-florida-campaign-event/5814764002/>

of pandering to Latinos based on his emphasis on the issue of immigration and his use of Spanish on the debate stage. Despite this accusation, Beto has consistently emphasized issues that are important to the Latino community which tells us that Beto likely was not pandering to Latino voters. A voter cannot know a political candidate's true intention of representing a group's interests but they will likely still make inferences as to whether a politician is pandering. This is why I argue that while whether a politician actually panders to a group of voters is likely important for a healthy democracy, perceptions of pandering are likely formed independently of whether the politician actually panders and should be studied independently.

In general, politicians don't pander. What a candidate talks about on the campaign trail tends to be the same type of legislation they pursue once in office (Sulkin, 2009). Some argue this is because politicians tailor their messaging and platform based on the large amounts of public opinion data available (Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000). Despite evidence that suggests politicians do not pander, the accusations still exist. These perceptions may matter for a politician's electoral viability as these pandering perceptions likely factor into candidate favorability and vote choice.³

Perceptions of pandering may arise for a multitude of reasons. One clear reason is motivated reasoning. Partisans are going to be more likely to believe that candidates from the opposite party are pandering based on a disconfirmation bias and will spend more time denigrating out-party candidates (Taber and Lodge, 2006). Similarly, partisans have a confirmation bias and will seek information that confirms candidates from their party are good and more sincere.

Voters may also use the type of issue a candidate is making an appeal with to help them form their perceptions of pandering and sincerity. Issues are typically distinguished as

³As an example, see this article where one person interviewed mentioned that she would not vote for Beto O'Rourke for Governor based on her belief that he does not sincerely care about the Latino community: <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/11/16/texas-governor-race-2022-beto-orourke-el-paso/>

either an economic or social issue (Laver, 2001). These issues activate different cognitions for voters meaning they interpret the effect of these issues differently (Domke, Shah and Wackman, 1998). Tavits (2007) distinguishes these issues as either principled (ideological) or pragmatic (welfare-maximizing) and shows that voters react differently to political party shifts for each of these issue types. More recent research has shown that voters will judge candidates who flip-flop on a principled issue differently (Simas, Milita and Ryan, 2021). This suggests that the type of issue a candidate appeals to a group with may affect how perceptions of pandering are formed.

The last piece of information this paper considers for how perceptions of pandering are formed is a politician's track record or voting history on the given issue they are appealing with. I argue that voters want a politician who is consistent because it signals information about their character and honesty. However, this may differ by issue type as voters also want a politician who is practical and can adapt to new information (Tavits, 2007). For the most part, however, voters will likely perceive that inconsistent politicians are pandering because they are shifting their position on issues depending on what is electorally advantageous.

To test these ideas I run a 2x2x2 repeated measures experiment among 758 Republicans and 770 Democrats recruited through Prolific. Each participant was randomly assigned to read about either a Republican or Democratic politician running for reelection. The text reported that the candidate was at a campaign event and either spoke on a principled or pragmatic issue and was reported to have either a consistent or inconsistent voting history on that issue. I find that Republican participants generally consider all Democrat politicians to be panders regardless of the issue or their voting history. Democrats, however, distinguish between Republican politicians and perceive consistent Republicans to be sincere. In general, the politicians' voting history matters most for how perceptions of pandering are formed where inconsistent politicians are perceived as pandering.

Motivated Reasoning and Value-Based Preferences

The political party the politician is a member of should matter for how perceptions of pandering are formed because partisanship is a group-based identity. Voters form psychological attachments toward a political party at an early age and this social identity tends to persist for the rest of their lives (Green, Palmquist and Schickler, 2004). As a social identity, people will want to believe things that elevate the status of their group and denigrate the status of outsider groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This leads to biased information processing and motivated evaluation formation (Jerit and Barabas, 2012; Taber and Lodge, 2006). This means that partisans will be motivated to believe that politicians from their own party are sincere and of good character and that politicians from outside parties are panderers taking advantage of their voters.

The extent that a voter is motivated to view a co-partisan politician in a positive light may be limited by how far the politician deviates from the voter's performance expectations. Namely, whether the politician's actions go against the individual's values. People form their opinion on issues based on two key factors: values and information (Dietz, 2013; Lupia, 2016). Defined by Schwartz (1992, p. 4), "Values (1) are concepts or beliefs, (2) pertain to desirable end states or behaviors, (3) transcend specific situations, (4) guide selection or evaluation of behavior and events, and (5) are ordered by relative importance." Values help structure and organize individual beliefs about the world (Feldman, 1988) and are the basis for the development of affective attachments toward political issues. What is referred to as "hot cognition," is the idea that political beliefs are positively or negatively affectively charged, and that this affect, stored in our long-term memory, is readily available whenever the belief object is activated (Redlawsk, 2002; Taber and Lodge, 2016). Objects that are "hot" tend to be social objects that people have been exposed to before and have been able to form affective attachments to them. Affect-charged social objects inform snap judgments

of associated political objects. In other words, people have had the opportunity to form their opinion toward these social objects and are able to quickly react either positively or negatively to political issues related to these social objects.

Values and hot cognition are the basis for what distinguishes an issue as either principled or pragmatic. I draw on [Tavits \(2007\)](#) distinction between principled and pragmatic issues. Tavits defines principled issues as social issues based on core values and beliefs (e.g. LGBTQ or Civil rights), and pragmatic issues as those associated with economic policy choices and welfare maximization. Although recent research has argued that this differentiation may be better explained by whether an issue has become moralized ([Ryan, 2014](#)). People are generally unwilling to compromise on principled issues which contributes to political polarization between Democrats and Republicans ([Clifford, 2019](#); [Ryan, 2017](#)). Any politician that does not support or who works against an individual's preference on a principled issue will likely be perceived as having bad character because their values are not aligned with the individuals. Since positions on principled issues tend to be owned by the political parties, any politician that supports legislation counter to the party's position will be perceived as pandering because voters will think the politician does not sincerely believe in the party's position ([Clifford, 2020](#); [Wright, Clifford and Simas, 2022](#)). In sum, there are limits to the extent a voter is motivated to view a co-partisan in a positive light, and having an inconsistent position on a principled issue is one such limit.

Issue Type and Perceptions of Pandering

Debates remain in Political Science as to whether people are informed about politics and make rational economic, political, and social decisions ([Converse, 1964](#); [Fowler et al., 2020](#); [Mason, 2018](#); [Fortunato, Stevenson and Vonnahme, 2016](#)). Those who argue people are not rational point to the strength of partisan identity as a predictor of policy preference

and the lack of stable political preferences (Mason, 2018). Several studies have documented how framing an issue in a particular way can change an individual's attitudes toward that issue as evidence of irrationality (Druckman, 2004; Tversky and Kahneman, 1989), although framing effects do not always work as intended (Druckman, 2001, 2004). Conversely, other research has shown people's ability to use cues from their political environment to make rational decisions (Bargsted and Kedar, 2009; Stevenson, 2001). This article does not take a stance on either side of this debate but it is helpful to point out that there is evidence that suggests people are rational and have stable preferences on some issues (Feldman, 1988; Fowler et al., 2020) and evidence that suggests people adopt the policy position of their party for other issues (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe, 2015; Mason, 2018). These results leave open the possibility that people have stable preferences for some issues but shift policy preferences for other issues. While I do not directly test this argument in this paper, I argue that people tend to have stable policy preferences on principled issues but not on pragmatic issues.

Strong preferences for principled issues but not pragmatic issues will mean that people will punish candidates when they are inconsistent on principled issues but not pragmatic issues. It is easier to justify why a candidate does not align with your preference for an issue you do not care strongly about than an issue you do care strongly about. Further, thinking that a candidate's stance has shifted on a principled issue can lead to lower evaluations of their character that may not happen for pragmatic issues (Clifford, 2014). Tavits (2007) provides evidence that people selectively punish policy shifts on principled but not pragmatic issues. In a study of 20 democracies including the United States, Tavits finds that parties lose support when they shift their position on principled issues but not pragmatic issues. In another study, Simas, Milita and Ryan (2021) tests whether candidates who adopt a clear or ambiguous stance on either a principled or pragmatic issue are given additional leeway once in office. After hearing the candidate's stance on the issue, participants were told that the candidate either voted in favor or against a bill addressing one of those issues. Participants

in this study only changed their evaluations of the candidate in response to the candidate flip-flopping on the principled issue but not the pragmatic issue. These results provide evidence that citizens seem to have stable and strong beliefs on principled issues. What is still unknown is how a politician's legislative history on either a principled or pragmatic issue affects a person's perceptions of whether the candidate is pandering.

In sum, people are motivated to believe that co-partisan politicians are sincere and non-co-partisans are pandering based on wanting to hold their group in higher esteem. Thus, I hypothesize that participants will perceive co-partisan candidates as more sincere compared to candidates from the opposite party (H1). I argue that people have strong preferences for principled issues and want a candidate that will work for those issues. This means that participants will perceive candidates who make principled appeals as more sincere compared to candidates who make appeals with no policy appeal (H2). People also want a politician who they believe is of good character so they will perceive candidates who have a consistent voting record on a given issue as more sincere compared to candidates whose voting record is unknown (H3). Consistency on a principled issue is especially important since it reflects the individual's values. Thus, I predict participants will perceive a co-partisan candidate who has an inconsistent voting record on a principled issue as pandering compared to a co-partisan candidate whose voting record is unknown (H4). Since they have a motivation to believe co-partisans are good and do not have strong feelings toward pragmatic issues, people will perceive co-partisan candidates who have an inconsistent voting record on a pragmatic issue as equally sincere as a co-partisan candidate whose voting record is unknown (H5).

While people are motivated to hold co-partisan politicians in high-esteem, they are also motivated to denigrate out-party politicians. This means that they will not attempt to explain away any inconsistent voting records so people will perceive out-party candidates who have an inconsistent voting record on a principled issue as pandering compared to an out-party candidate whose voting record is unknown (H6). This will also hold true for issues

the person does not feel strongly about so they will perceive out-party candidates who have an inconsistent voting record on a pragmatic issue as pandering compared to an out-party candidate whose voting record is unknown (H7).⁴

Methods

To test my hypotheses, I run a 2x2x2 quasi-pre-post experiment with two control conditions. The pre-post design is a repeated measure design that allows me to run a within-subjects and between-subjects analysis. Using a repeated measure design yields greater treatment effect precision and helps improve the power of one's analysis (Clifford, Sheagley and Piston, 2021).⁵ 770 Democrats and 758 Republicans were recruited from the survey firm Prolific in the Summer of 2022 for a total of 1,528 participants.⁶ These participants were told that they would be participating in an approximately 8-minute survey asking about their opinion on political campaign events. Participants were paid \$1.50 which equates to about \$11.50 an hour.

Participants were first asked to give their consent to participate in the study. After, participants were randomly assigned to their party conditions although the treatment came later in the study. Participants were asked two questions that measure perceptions of pandering toward the party that they were assigned to. This serves as the first measure of my dependent variable for the repeated measures design. I then ask participants their opinion on both the principled and pragmatic issues used in the experiment. Participants answered demographic questions including age, gender, race, education, income, and partisanship. Prior

⁴All hypotheses are pre-registered using Open Science Foundation. At this time the study is embargoed but can be released upon request.

⁵There is some concern that using a repeated measures design in an experiment risks priming your subjects to your treatment. As discussed by Clifford, Sheagley and Piston (2021), there is little empirical evidence to support that any treatment corruption occurs. Regardless, to help alleviate this concern I had participants answer a distractor question prior to the treatment.

⁶Number of subjects recruited was determined through a power analysis using Declare Design.

to being assigned to one of the ten treatment groups, participants answered two questions that served as a distractor task and attention check.

Participants were asked to read a section of a newspaper article covering a campaign event of a member of Congress (MC) running for reelection. In the control conditions, participants read about either a Republican or Democrat MC based on the party they were assigned to at the beginning of the experiment with no other information about the issues the MC talked about or the MC's voting history. In the treatment conditions, participants read about the candidate talking about either a principled or pragmatic issue. Trans rights to use the restroom according to the gender they identify with was used as the principled issue and tax breaks for large companies that create jobs was used as the pragmatic issue. The positions the Democrat and Republican candidate had for these issues was congruent with the national party's position to best reflect the real world. The article then reported that the candidate either voted in favor or against a bill on that issue in the previous congressional session. This results in a 2x2x2 factorial experiment with two control conditions. An image of one of the treatments is seen in [1](#) below.

I use four questions to measure perceptions of pandering. Individual responses to these four questions are added together and rescaled to range from zero to one to form an additive index which serves as my main dependent variable. Each respondent was asked "On a scale of 1 to 5, how genuine do you think [candidate] is about addressing the concerns that are important to the [party assignment] community?" "How committed do you think [candidate] is to representing [party assignment] interests?" "How much do you think [candidate] wants to represent [party assignment] interests?" and "Do you believe [candidate] is just pandering to [party assignment]s, or is sincere in wanting to represent their interests?" The pretreatment dependent variable asks how genuine the participant's assigned party is and whether the participant believes the assigned party is sincere or pandering. Since the candidate in the treatment is hypothetical, I assume that participants' baseline perceptions of pandering to

The Editorial Board's summary of the incumbent candidate's recent campaign event.

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Back on the campaign trail, Michael Williams, the Democrat incumbent of the district spoke to a crowded room of Democrat voters. After talking for several minutes about some of his priorities for the upcoming legislative session, he finished his speech by saying:

“I will continue to work to strengthen our economy and improve our district. Together, we can build a brighter future for our families and our whole community.”

Michael Williams ended the event by taking time to allow the voters to ask questions and take pictures. The election will be held in November later this year where they will face off against the challenger.

Figure 1: Democrat Control Treatment Screen

that candidate are similar to their beliefs about how Republicans and Democrats in general pander. These questions were validated as a means of measuring perceptions of pandering in a previous study. All four items loaded onto a single factor extremely well.

Language from [Simas, Milita and Ryan \(2021\)](#)'s experiment on ambiguous rhetoric and issue type were used for the Democrat and Republican positions on principled and pragmatic issues. I use this language since it has successfully manipulated the intended issue positions for principled and pragmatic issues. The issue positions for the Republican and Democrat candidates reflect what is expected of a Republican or Democrat platform. The treatment text is similar across conditions besides the text used to describe the position the Democrat and Republican politicians take on the issue and the text used to describe the bill the politician voted on. I provide the text for the principled and pragmatic issue positions below. The text for the entire vignette can be found in Section [A](#) of the appendix.

Principled Democrat: “From boardrooms to bathrooms, lesbian, gay, trans-

gender, and queer individuals should be protected from discrimination under the law – period”

Principled Republican: “Women and girls should have privacy and safety in their restrooms, showers, and locker rooms. I will fight to keep the genders separate and safe.”

Pragmatic Democrat: “Let’s rebuild our infrastructure, not provide tax breaks to big corporations.”

Pragmatic Republican: “We need to remove job-killing taxes and burdensome regulations that are driving businesses to other states.”

Results

I report the results for Democrat and Republican participants separately.⁷ Columns 1 and 3 of Table 1 show the results for Republicans and Democrats, respectively, using a linear model where the post-treatment measure of perceptions of pandering is the dependent variable and each treatment group is a factor variable with the baseline condition being the inparty control condition. The models in columns 2 and 4 are similar except the dependent variable measured prior to the treatment is included as a control variable.⁸ The repeated measure design increases the precision of my estimates giving me more confidence in the interpretation of the results.

To evaluate my hypothesis that people will perceive co-partisan candidates as more sin-

⁷You can find a visualization of the models controlling for pre-treatment perceptions of pandering in Figure 4 in the Appendix.

⁸There are considered two ways to analyze repeated measure designs (Clifford, Sheagley and Piston, 2021). First, you can use the difference of your dependent variable in which the pre-treatment value is subtracted from the post-treatment value to create a new dependent variable. The second method uses the post-treatment dependent variable measure as your main dependent variable and you control for the pre-treatment measure. It is recommended to condition on the pre-treatment measure when using experiments (Blair et al., 2019).

Table 1: Treatment Effect on Perceptions of Pandering

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Perceptions of Pandering			
	Republicans		Democrats	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Ingroup Principled Inconsistent	-0.225*** (0.038)	-0.219*** (0.034)	-0.242*** (0.037)	-0.247*** (0.034)
Ingroup Principled Consistent	0.129*** (0.038)	0.143*** (0.034)	0.174*** (0.038)	0.164*** (0.034)
Ingroup Pragmatic Inconsistent	-0.161*** (0.038)	-0.194*** (0.034)	-0.199*** (0.037)	-0.210*** (0.034)
Ingroup Pragmatic Consistent	0.094** (0.039)	0.101*** (0.034)	0.161*** (0.038)	0.132*** (0.034)
Outgroup Control	-0.149*** (0.037)	-0.010 (0.035)	-0.057 (0.038)	0.045 (0.035)
Outgroup Principled Inconsistent	-0.318*** (0.038)	-0.180*** (0.036)	-0.189*** (0.037)	-0.103*** (0.034)
Outgroup Principled Consistent	-0.172*** (0.038)	-0.014 (0.036)	0.054 (0.038)	0.145*** (0.035)
Outgroup Pragmatic Inconsistent	-0.316*** (0.039)	-0.165*** (0.036)	-0.152*** (0.038)	-0.042 (0.035)
Outgroup Pragmatic Consistent	-0.147*** (0.038)	0.011 (0.035)	0.044 (0.037)	0.137*** (0.034)
Pandering Pre-treatment		0.461*** (0.033)		0.409*** (0.032)
Constant	0.609*** (0.027)	0.328*** (0.031)	0.510*** (0.027)	0.298*** (0.030)
Observations	751	751	762	762
R ²	0.282	0.432	0.288	0.415
Adjusted R ²	0.273	0.424	0.279	0.407

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

cere compared to candidates from the opposite party we can look at the coefficients for the outgroup control condition in Table 1. Based on these data, Republicans perceived that the Democrat candidate was less sincere compared to a Republican candidate without knowing any additional information about the candidates ($b = -0.149, p < 0.001$; Model 1). This effect, however, is not statistically or substantively significant in the model that conditions on the pre-treatment dependent variable measure ($b = -0.010, p = 0.7664$; Model 2). Among Democrat respondents, the Democrat candidate is not perceived to be any more sincere compared to the Republican candidate in either the post-only model or the pre-post model. In sum, there is mixed evidence for my first hypothesis with most of the evidence supporting the null hypothesis. Absent information about the politicians' policy proposals and voting history, partisans do not perceive Republicans or Democrats to be any more likely to pander than the other.

Tables 2 and 3 model the results of the experiment by treatment condition separately for Republican and Democrat participants, respectively. The baseline for each model is the control condition for the party that is being manipulated. For example, in Table 2 the baseline in Models 1 and 2 is the Republican control condition and the baseline for Models 3 and 4 is the Democrat control condition. These results help us evaluate the effects of candidates making a principled or pragmatic appeal and the candidate's legislative history on perceptions of pandering.

Looking at Tables 2 and 3, the importance of a candidate having a consistent legislative history stands out. Models 2 and 4 of Table 2 show that the Republican participants perceive Republican and Democrat politicians with an inconsistent legislative history as pandering. A similar effect of inconsistency shows for Democrat participants. Republican participants are also more likely to perceive Republican politicians with a consistent legislative history as more sincere. Consistent Democrats are not perceived as any more sincere, however, among Republican participants. On the other hand, Democrat participants perceive that

Table 2: Individual Treatment Effects Among Republicans

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Perceptions of Pandering			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Republican Principled	-0.032 (0.037)			
Republican Pragmatic	-0.049 (0.037)			
Republican Inconsistent		-0.206*** (0.030)		
Republican Consistent		0.123*** (0.030)		
Democrat Principled			-0.085*** (0.030)	
Democrat Pragmatic			-0.062** (0.030)	
Democrat Inconsistent				-0.162*** (0.028)
Democrat Consistent				0.009 (0.028)
Pandering Pre-treatment	0.391*** (0.061)	0.458*** (0.050)	0.450*** (0.046)	0.466*** (0.043)
Constant	0.371*** (0.048)	0.330*** (0.039)	0.321*** (0.028)	0.316*** (0.026)
Observations	372	372	379	379
R ²	0.104	0.389	0.221	0.316
Adjusted R ²	0.097	0.384	0.215	0.311

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

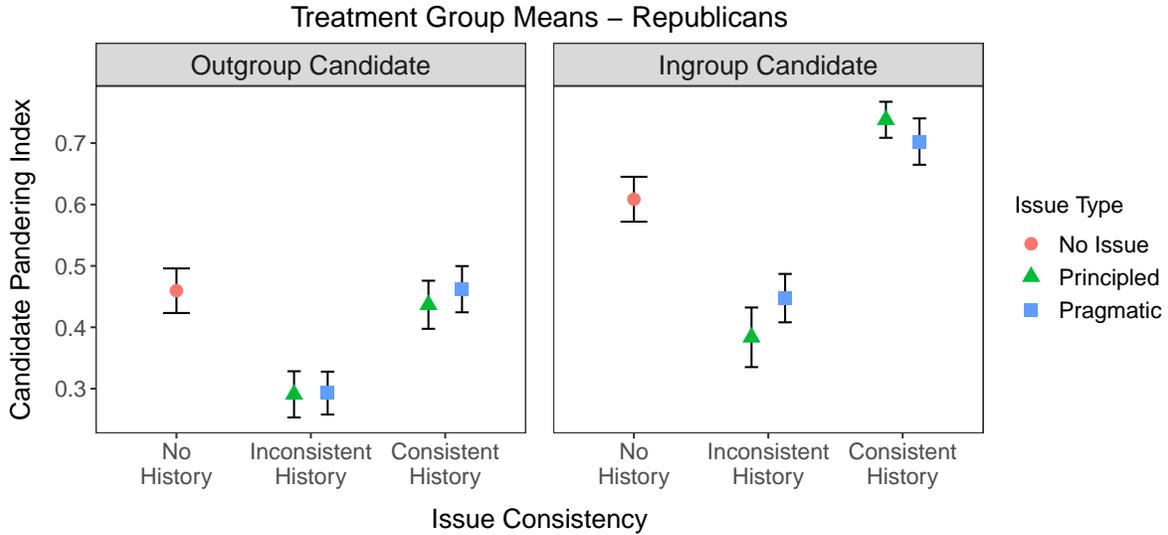


Figure 2: Group means for each treatment group are reported for the 758 Republican participants. 84% confidence intervals are used to more easily distinguish which effects are statistically significant.

both Republican and Democrat politicians with a consistent legislative history are sincere. These results support my third hypothesis that politicians with a consistent voting record will be perceived as more sincere.

I argued that politicians who make principled appeals will be perceived as more sincere, however, looking at Tables 2 and 3 we do not see this effect. Models 1 and 3 in both of these tables show us the effect of a politician using a principled or pragmatic appeal compared to a politician of the same party making an appeal without any issue content. The only significant effect among these models is among Republicans evaluating a Democrat making a principled or pragmatic appeal. Both coefficients are negative which may indicate that it is not the type of issue driving this response but the fact that it is an out-party politician.

To better understand the interaction of issue type and candidate legislative history I visualize the results in Figures 2 and 3. Figure 2 visualizes the results among Republican participants and Figure 3 does so for the Democrat participants. These figures show the average level of perceptions of pandering for each treatment group with 84% confidence

Table 3: Individual Treatment Effects Among Democrats

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Perceptions of Pandering			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Democrat Principled	-0.051 (0.039)			
Democrat Pragmatic	-0.047 (0.039)			
Democrat Inconsistent		-0.228*** (0.030)		
Democrat Consistent		0.150*** (0.030)		
Republican Principled			-0.029 (0.032)	
Republican Pragmatic			0.007 (0.032)	
Republican Inconsistent				-0.119*** (0.029)
Republican Consistent				0.096*** (0.029)
Pandering Pre-treatment	0.408*** (0.059)	0.369*** (0.046)	0.454*** (0.049)	0.441*** (0.045)
Constant	0.299*** (0.044)	0.319*** (0.034)	0.331*** (0.029)	0.335*** (0.027)
Observations	379	379	383	383
R ²	0.114	0.471	0.184	0.330
Adjusted R ²	0.107	0.467	0.178	0.324

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

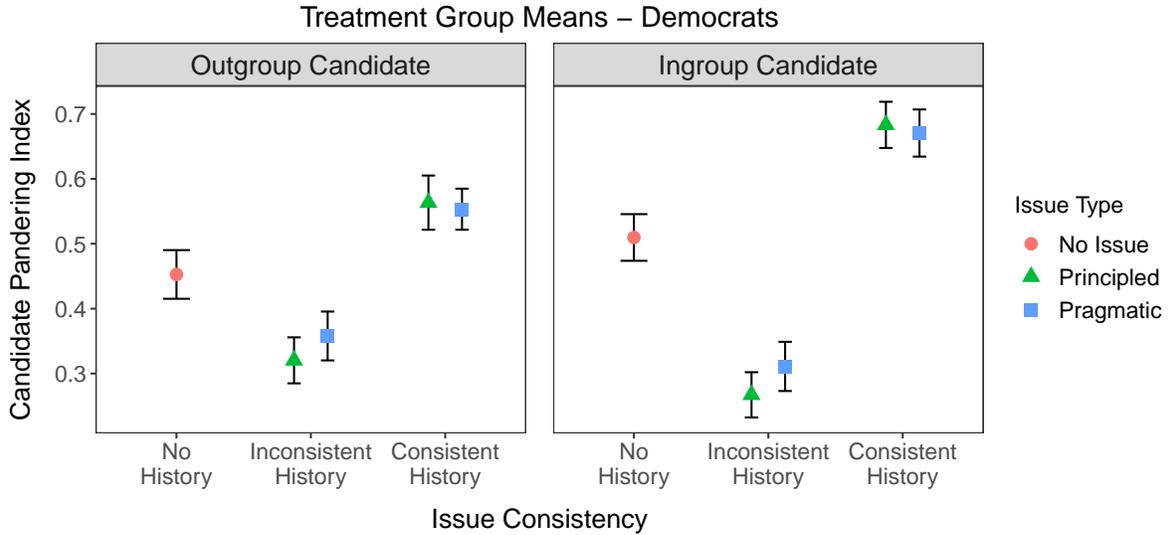


Figure 3: Group means for each treatment group are reported for the 770 Democrat participants. 84% confidence intervals are used to more easily distinguish which effects are statistically significant.

intervals.⁹ I predicted that people would not perceive inconsistent pragmatic appeals made by a co-partisan candidate as pandering but looking at the right side of each figure shows that the participants perceived pragmatic and principled appeals similarly regardless of the candidate’s legislative history.

Overall, the participants in the principled and pragmatic appeal treatment groups evaluated the sincerity of the candidate similarly regardless of the party of the candidate or the candidate’s history supporting the issue they are appealing with. These figures emphasize the importance of a candidate’s legislative consistency for shaping perceptions of pandering toward that candidate. Both Democrats and Republicans perceive politicians from their party who have a consistent legislative background as sincere and those who have an inconsistent legislative background as panders. Republican candidates can increase their perceived sincerity among Democrats by having a consistent legislative background. Democrat candi-

⁹I use 84% confidence intervals as opposed to the traditional 95% confidence intervals so that non-overlapping confidence intervals can be interpreted as statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level (Payton, Greenstone and Schenker, 2003; Schenker and Gentleman, 2001).

dates, however, seem to always be perceived as panderers among Republicans regardless of whether the way they vote is congruent with the policy they appeal with.

Discussion

The results of this experiment suggest that both Democrats care about a candidate having a voting history that is consistent with the type of policy that they are campaigning on. This is inconsistent with previous findings which find that voters are less likely to punish parties that shift their views on pragmatic issues (Tavits, 2007) or that voters will punish politicians who flip-flop on principled or moral issues but not pragmatic issues (Simas, Milita and Ryan, 2021). The issue subjects used for this experiment are the same as those used by Simas, Milita and Ryan (2021) with the largest distinctions between the two studies being they measure two different candidate evaluation dimensions and the subjects are either learning how the candidate has performed in the past or learning how they act in the future.

One potential explanation for this difference is whether the candidate has already made the evaluation of the candidate. In the experiment presented in this paper, participants learned about the candidate's inconsistency before giving their evaluation of the candidate. In the Simas, Milita and Ryan (2021) studies, participants gave their evaluation of the candidate based on their initial campaign statements then were told whether the candidate was consistent or flip-flopped and given the opportunity to evaluate the candidate again. Participants may be motivated to have a consistent evaluation of the candidate and are thus more motivated to reason why the politician is inconsistent (Cialdini, Trost and Newsom, 1995). Although, recent research has found little evidence for these types of demand effects (Mummolo and Peterson, 2019). Future research on perceptions of pandering should investigate whether there are any sunk-costs type of effects where if a voter has already stated their evaluation of a candidate whether they are more likely to engage in motivated reason-

ing versus if they are making their initial evaluation. Further, studies on demand effects in experiments can study whether demand effects exist when evaluating the same stimuli.

Future iterations of this experiment should test whether the lack of effect between principled and pragmatic issues persists depending on the issue subjects. This experiment only tested this concept with issues of Trans-rights and tax-breaks for larger companies that create jobs. Moving forward, studies should also take into account individual feelings toward these issues. Research has found that moralized issues vary by person and strength ([Ryan, 2014](#)). Considering that the experiment presented in this paper only considers two issues, it could be the case that subjects are willing to forgive politicians on pragmatic issues that they do not feel as strongly about.

Conclusion

In sum, this article adds to our knowledge of American politics by showing that voters' perceptions of pandering are shaped by whether a politician is campaigning on an issue they have a consistent legislative history on. Further, this paper builds on previous research showing how partisan affect shapes citizens' perceptions of the political world ([Ward and Tavits, 2019](#)). Republicans in this experiment perceived that virtually all Democrat candidates pandered to Democrat voters. Democrat participants, however, distinguished between consistent and inconsistent Republican politicians and perceived consistent Republicans as sincerely wanting to represent Republican voters. The Democrat participants judging Republican politicians also distinguished between principled and pragmatic issues based on the inconsistent Republican campaigning on a principled issue being perceived as pandering but the inconsistent Republican campaigning on a pragmatic issue being perceived just as sincere as a Republican whose campaign appeal is unknown. This emphasizes how the two parties think of each other and form evaluations differently.

Lastly, this study shows that citizens use information about the candidate to form evaluations of political pandering. Democrat voters, at least, do not just automatically assume all Republican politicians are pandering. Further, both parties use information about politicians voting history to determine whether they perceive politicians from their own party are pandering. This is especially important in the context of primary politics when politicians are competing to be the party nominee. Future studies can investigate what other aspects of co-partisan politicians voters use to determine that politician's sincerity in representing their group's interests.

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A Experiment Manipulations

Party manipulation

“Back on the campaign trail, Michael Williams, the [Party] incumbent of the district spoke to a crowded room of [Party] voters. After talking for several minutes about some of his priorities for the upcoming legislative session, he finished his speech by saying:”

Issue Manipulation

Principled Democrat: “From boardrooms to bathrooms, lesbian, gay, transgender, and queer individuals should be protected from discrimination under the law – period”

Principled Republican: “Women and girls should have privacy and safety in their restrooms, showers, and locker rooms. I will fight to keep the genders separate and safe.”

Pragmatic Democrat: “Let’s rebuild our infrastructure, not provide tax breaks to big corporations.”

Pragmatic Republican: “We need to remove job-killing taxes and burdensome regulations that are driving businesses to other states.”

Control: “I will continue to work to strengthen our economy and improve our district. Together, we can build a brighter future for our families and our whole community.”

Consistency Manipulation

Treatment: “Looking at the voting record of Michael Williams, last year he voted [in favor/against] a bill that [requires all individuals to use the restroom

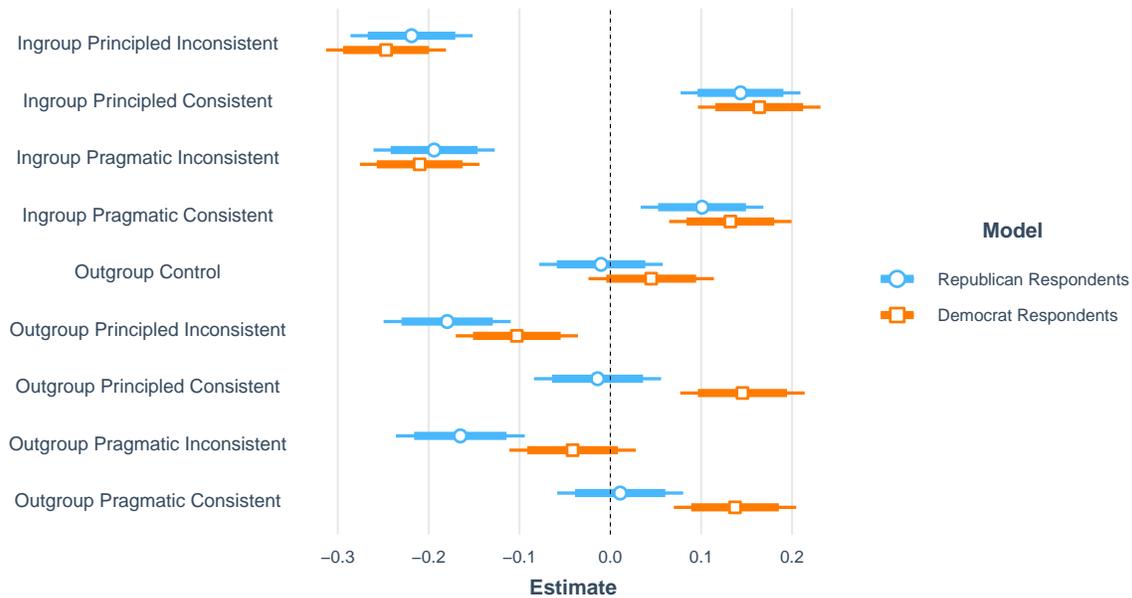
that corresponds with the gender on their birth certificate/gave special tax exemptions for large companies creating jobs in the state.] Michael Williams ended the event by taking time to allow the voters to ask questions and take pictures. The election will be held in November later this year where they will face off against the challenger.”

Control: “Michael Williams ended the event by taking time to allow the voters to ask questions and take pictures. The election will be held in November later this year where they will face off against the challenger.”

B Additional Analyses

Figure 4 plots the coefficients from a model where each treatment group is an independent variable and the dependent variable is perceptions of pandering. These models take into account my repeated measure design.

Figure 4: Coefficient Plot Controlling for Pre-treatment values



C Demographic Summary

Treatment Group	n	Age	% Female	Education (1-8)	Income (0-11)	Ideology (1-7)
Republican Control	153	38	53	4	6	4
Republican Prin. Incon	153	38	48	4	6	4
Republican Prin. Con	153	40	56	4	6	4
Republican Prag. Incon	149	40	52	4	6	4
Republican Prag. Con	154	41	60	4	6	4
Democrat Control	153	41	51	5	6	4
Democrat Prin. Incon	154	38	60	4	6	4
Democrat Prin. Con	153	39	57	4	6	4
Democrat Prag. Incon	152	38	60	4	6	4
Democrat Prag. Con	154	41	55	4	6	4
Total	1,528	40	55	4	6	4