Soliciting Commitment: How Political Parties Shape Partisan Attachments

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Abstract: Partisanship reflects group ties and policy preferences associated with a party. Once aligned, group-party associations intensify attachments, suggesting an influence on polarization, reasoning, and vote loyalty. Classic and modern models of partisanship diverge in terms of the role of parties and the key aspects of groups that are foundational to partisan attachments. While the classic model highlights the party's role in partisanship without consideration of group ties, a more modern model emphasizes group sentiments without the direct influence of political parties. This study proposes a Targeting Model of Partisanship (TMP) that stresses how elite strategies that emphasize group ties can impact partisan attachments. Using a survey experiment, the TMP argues that the effectiveness across group appeals rests on prior group-party associations, by which parties prompt partisans to the prototypical member. When partisans associate a group with which they identify with their party as well, the appeals to this group intensify partisan attachments. Further, these more-intense attachments transform the effects of elite appeals into polarization and voting loyalties. The TMP advances the current literature of elite strategies and partisanship, proposing a strategic approach of identity politics connected to elite behaviour that is designed to solicit commitment and define boundaries of belonging in public opinion.

Keywords: Elite strategies; Partisanship; Groups; Experiment; Mediation Analysis.

Word count:

INTRODUCTION

A longstanding debate is dedicated to understanding the foundations of partisanship. Distinctive views of partisanship diverge into either an instrumental attachment based on policy agreements and performances (Fiorina, 1981; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2006) or expressive partisanship based on social identities and group ties (Huddy et al., 2015). From this latter view, a large body of research demonstrates that expressive partisanship plays a pivotal role in enhancing affective polarization (Dias & Lelkes, 2021), in shaping citizens' motivated reasoning (Peterson & Iyengar, 2021), and increasing stability in voting decisions (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002). However, despite multiple studies about both views of partisanship, researchers have yet to fully understand how expressive attachment intensifies and why this attachment's appeal changes citizens' behaviour.

From *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960) to more recent models (e.g., Groenendyk, 2013; Arceneaux & Vander Wielen, 2017), expressive partisan identity has been framed as an individual-level factor. Socialization, personal traits, and partisan motivations explain why people develop partisanship as a social identity and how expressive attachment influences policy preferences and performance evaluations. A few models are dedicated to explaining expressive attachments beyond individual-level factors (e.g., Kollman & Jackson, 2021). Among these models, two are noteworthy. First, the Branding Model of Partisanship has shown that party strategies can blur differences between opponents and partisan supporters and, as a result, weaken attachments and electoral stability (Lupu, 2013; 2016). Second, the Group Sentiment Model of Partisanship (GSMP) demonstrates that for partisans informed about party connections with an unfavorably viewed group, the appeal of partisan identity is diminished (Kane, Mason, & Wronski, 2021). As these works indicate how expressive partisanship declines, they also suggest how expressive attachments are boosted by associations with the party and the consequences of partisan identities on partisan polarization and voting decisions.

A gap in this literature refers to the active role of political parties in shaping expressive partisan identity. Parties influence public opinion by informing voters about policy positions and group affiliations through cues (Bullock, 2011) while also priming predispositions (Tesler, 2015). As partisan identity reflects a coalition of social identities that exist within a party (Mason & Wronski, 2018), parties can use group ties to prime expressive partisan identities. Some strategies involve using appeals to build group coalitions, known as group-based appeals (Hersh & Schaffner, 2013). These appeals are tailored messages emphasizing group affiliations to leverage support. Although scholars have documented the total effect of appeals on polarization (Huber, Meyer, & Wagner, 2024) and, more often, voting choice (Thau, 2021; Robison et al., 2021), the use of group-based appeals as a factor that boosts engagement by increasing expressive attachments is theoretically underdeveloped and empirically unclear.

I propose a Targeting Model of Partisanship (TMP), in which it is theorized that group-based appeals to existing group-party associations can increase the influence of expressive partisanship. Group-based appeals differ in their effectiveness regarding specific group ties (Iyengar & Valentino, 2000). Prior group-party associations within party images have been found to be pivotal in current literature (e.g., Rahn, 1993; Ahler & Sood, 2018; Orr & Huber, 2021). For example, some groups are historically connected with a party. This strategy refers to targeting in-groups whose prior group-party association is well-known and a product of longstanding connections (or in-targeting). On the other hand, strategies

can also include appealing to out-groups associated with the opposition coalition to explore potential vulnerabilities (Hillygus & Shield, 2008), known here as out-targeting, and/or broad appeals to groups without a clear association with any party (Somer-Topcu, 2015). Therefore, the TMP argues that partisans, when exposed to in-targeting, tend to feel closer to groups affiliated with their party even if they are not affiliated with the group. Relative to broad appeals, in-targeting primes the prototypical member in terms of partisan identity, an image of the people traditionally supporting the party, which is developed in partisans' minds through socialization. Through in-targeting, a party boosts expressive attachments and enhances its appeals on citizens' behaviour. By comparison, out-targeting decreases the distance between the party stereotype and the proximity of the opposition coalition. There is a risk of blurring differentiation from the opposition coalition, which can result in a decline of expressive attachments and decreased effects on behaviour, relative to broad appeals that do not confuse the party stereotypes. Hence, prior associations are central in the TMP. As group-based appeals increase awareness about the groups a party prioritizes, emphasis on prior associations primes expressive partisan identity. The TMP combines the prior information with the parties' central role in shaping partisan attachments, while considering how expressive partisanship shapes behavioural outcomes.

Drawing upon a survey experiment (n = 1,430) with several randomly assigned group-based appeals (i.e., to Canadians, unionized workers, foreign workers, and business owners), I demonstrate that in-targeting appeals enhance expressive attachments, but not instrumental attachments, relative to broad appeals and out-targeting appeals. Surprisingly, my results reveal that out-targeting appeals increase expressive partisan attachments relative to broad appeals, suggesting that partisanship relies on appealing to specific groups rather than targeting a group without a clear association to any party. Testing whether partisan attachments shape the relationship between targeted appeals and behavioural outcomes, I find that partisanship is a key mechanism for affective polarization and a relevant moderator for in-party voting.

This article advances the study of the interplay between group identities, political parties and partisanship. First, it highlights political parties as forces that can develop and change expressive partisanship. Second, I test and demonstrate the classification of appeals involving prior associations. Previous models have incorporated the alignments between group and party as integral for partisanship (Kane et al., 2021) or prior information alone (Lupu, 2013; 2016). Prior associations with group ties enable the classification of targeted appeals into the three categories (i.e., in-targeting, out-targeting, and broad appeals), which expands on previous studies' contributions. For example, appeals that diverge from a party's image have been overlooked in what little scholarship that integrates party appeals exists, regardless of whether an opposition group or everyone is targeted. Third, this paper takes a broad view of the types of attachments that these appeals can impact. I provide an update to models of partisanship that explore effects from either group identities or policy stances, investigating the impact of appeals on both instrumental and expressive partisanship. I also account for the interplay between partisanships using a multi-mediator method to represent the interplay between partisanships. Further, these findings have a normative implication for theories about parties and partisanship. Whereas expressive partisanship can produce undesirable outcomes for democracy, such as loathing across partisan groups, a substantial part of this attachment can be related back to parties as a source. As parties influence partisan predispositions through targeted appeals, the emphasis on partisanship as a threat to democracy overlooks

the role of elites and their strategies for the current scenario of deep divisions and potential solutions for hostilities among citizens.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Previous models of partisanship and its consequences

Harkening back to the original formulation in *The American Voter*, partisanship is a longstanding psychological attachment to a political party. This original formulation, however, has been challenged over the years. Two distinct views have been developed about the foundations, stability and consequences of partisanship. Based on a rational choice approach, revisionists of the original formulation posit that partisan attachments reflect a 'running tally' of policy positions, ideology, and leader performances on critical issues (Fiorina, 1981; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2006). This instrumental view of partisanship can be stable, but not fixed like social identifications, as accumulated positive evaluations increase stability in partisan attachments (Groenendyk, 2013). Furthermore, the conceptualization of instrumental partisanship suggests a desirable attachment: voters are oriented by policy issues and hold parties accountable for policy changes. On the other hand, and unlike instrumental partisanship, Huddy et al. (2015) formalized an expressive view of partisanship. Based on identity politics, expressive partisanship reflects a social identity, a stable sense of personal connection and belonging with a partisan identity. While Huddy et al. find that expressive partisanship predicts more participation and involvement in politics, it contributes to loathing across groups, motivated reasoning, and the lack of accountability in voting decisions (see also Huddy et al., 2018).

Despite the sharp contrast between instrumental and expressive attachments, the foundation of expressive attachment remains less understood than instrumental partisanship. Much research suggests that policy positions follow partisan identity (Carsey & Layman, 2006; Dancey & Goren, 2010; cf. Garzia, 2013). Hence, these studies implicitly indicate that expressive partisanship would dominate instrumental partisanship in individual attachments across multiple scenarios. Nevertheless, these studies have never ruled out instrumental attachments (Bankert, 2024). In the US and European countries, instrumental partisanship is also associated with enthusiasm, and it has a higher effect in predicting behavioural outcomes in multiparty systems, where policy differentiation is more pivotal (e.g., Bankert et al., 2017). However, expressive attachment likely dominates the interplay between the types of partisanship views and influences the strength of instrumental attachments.

Regarding expressive attachment as a dependent variable, two models of partisanship deserve specific attention. Table 1 summarizes these two models of partisanship that serve as the basis for the next steps of my article. The first model is the Branding Model, developed by Lupu (2016) out of concern about the dramatic decline in voting for established parties in Latin America. In a Bayesian learning process, in which partisans use prior information to update attachments, the model illuminates the role of parties in developing partisan identity. A key point in the Branding Model is that this prior information builds a prototypical image of policy preferences and group affiliations related to party labels, known as party brands. Whereas political parties react to societal divisions when determining the alliances they can represent (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967), parties also aim to win elections and bargain with group coalitions (Sartori, 1976). When policy agendas are clear, prior information can influence the strength of partisan attachments when there are political disputes over attracting out-partisans. Using experiments with

electoral platforms, Lupu finds that when platforms converge with another party, partisan identity strength declines. A significant consequence of the model is that, without partisan identity, established parties become vulnerable to performance evaluations and an eventual decline in party voting. In contrast, Lupu considers that parties can increase partisan identity strength by comparing and enhancing the ideological distinction between the electoral platforms. Finally, age and political information moderate the effect of ideological differentiation, as they have different degrees of prior brand association at the top of the mind, impacting how young people and informed voters update partisan attachments (Lupu, 2013; p. 54).

Table 1: Summary of Models of Partisanship with Partisan Identity as Dependent Variable

	Group Sentiment Model of Partisanship (Kane, Mason, and Wronski, 2021)	Branding Model (Lupu, 2013; 2016)
Context	The American bipartisan system	Latin American multiparty systems (e.g., Argentina and Venezuela)
Partisan Attachment	Expressive partisanship, measured by the Expressive Scale (Huddy et al., 2015).	Partisan identity strength is measured by the strength of party identification on a 0-10 scale.
Mechanism	Awareness of out-group support and group affect.	Alliances/switching information on the policy agenda and prior information about party support.
Consequences	Partisan polarization	Evaluations and voting loyalty

Notes: These points reflect differences between the two models that explain partisan identity strength.

In current literature, the primary explanation for expressive attachment is group ties. Scholars from the group-based approach of partisanship argue that expressive partisan identity reflects a multitude of social identities (Mason, 2018; cf. Egan, 2020), in which groups sorted into partisan coalitions enhance partisanship for those who hold social identifications or even those that just like the social group that is associated with the party (Mason & Wronski, 2018). From this literature, Kane et al. (2021) propose the Group Sentiment Model of Partisanship (GSMP), which states that awareness of group affiliation and sentiments toward a group predict partisan identity strength among American voters. In a series of experiments, they inform participants about extreme group alignment with a party. Partisans weaken their attachments when an unfavourable group is associated with their party, implying a pivotal role for group affect in the GSMP model. In contrast, partisan identity strengthens when unfavourable groups are associated with the opposition. The main consequence of this model is partisan polarization, since "partisanship operates, at least in part, via group sentiments related to social out-groups" (p. 1785).

Despite their complexity, comparing these models reveals some gaps in the partisanship literature. Unlike the GSMP, the Branding Model proposes that political parties are primarily responsible for partisan identity strength. While the model emphasizes how party strategy shapes allegiances, it also stresses that prior information affects learning about party positioning on policy issues. In the end, they have a significant impact on performance evaluations and in-party voting. Nevertheless, the Branding Model relies heavily on policy perceptions rather than the group-based foundation of partisanship (e.g., Achen and Bartels, 2016). Yet, early studies highlighted how groups are pivotal for political support. For example, Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) argue that preferences are exposed to opposing forces stemming from group identities. The Branding Model refers to partisan identity strength and identity politics, focusing on comparative fit, but it is unspecified in terms of its view of partisanship. It focuses on the measurement of partisan identity strength, a scale that ranges from 0 to 10, which does not distinguish between the expressive or instrumental components.

By comparison, the GSMP incorporates group identities into the study of developing and intensifying expressive partisanship. The GSMP also measures partisan identity strength using the Expressive Scale, which provides construct validity for the dependent variable. However, the model only suggests a passive, not active, role for political parties in boosting expressive attachment. The mechanism is that partisans should be aware of the group alignment, accepting or rejecting based on sentiments toward the group. Thus, the model cannot rule out expressive cue-taking, which enhances awareness and motivates partisans to seek consistency with the party stereotype while rejecting inconsistency with the party image (Rahn, 1993; Bakker, Lelkes, and Malka, 2020). Beyond awareness and sentiments, partisans ultimately adjust their support according to how well the prototypical group is associated with the party, avoiding inconsistencies with the party image (e.g., Kane, 2019).

In this article, the two highlighted models provide insights into the foundations and consequences of expressive partisan attachments. Yet they both look incomplete when compared to each other. Combining the strengths of these two models has the advantage of marrying a long tradition of a group approach to partisanship with the less explored perspective of the active role of political parties. Parties can work in multiple ways to influence citizens, specifically partisans attached to them. Leeper and Slothuus (2014) argue that parties tell citizens what political predispositions should be applied and how in politics. While parties are a political mobilizing force, group identities are the input by which parties can prime predispositions like partisan identity (e.g., Tesler, 2015). Thus, a fundamental question is which aspect of group identities is needed to prime partisanship among supporters. In the next section, I review the active role of political parties, prior associations, and the aspects of groups that influence expressive attachments in the Targeting Model of Partisanship.

The Targeting Model of Partisanship

I propose a partisanship model that combines aspects of previous models to argue that political parties can shape expressive partisan attachments. The TMP connects the group approach to partisan identity and expressive attachments from the GSMP with the learning process and the party's role from the Branding Model. Despite being the object of partisan attachments, political parties have often been relegated to the margins of partisanship models. In many cases, partisan attachments were the products of individual socialization (Campbell et al., 1960), political motivations (Groenendyk, 2013) or personal

traits (Arceneaux & Vander Wielen, 2017). Little is known about the extent of active parties' impact on partisanship. Only in extreme events, like 'the big shift' after the civil rights era, has the role of parties in shaping partisanship been recognized (Green, Palmquist, Schickler, 2002). Although partisan attachments have been considered an undesirable factor for democracy due to the lack of responsiveness and accountability they facilitate (Arceneaux & Vander Wielen, 2017; cf. White & Ypi, 2016), political parties otherwise have received positive evaluations since they are considered 'institutions of pluralism' and deliberative organizations (Aldrich, 1995). Nevertheless, parties are fundamental when explaining political commitment and partisan-driven outcomes. For example, scholars find that party behaviour can factor into affective polarization (Huber, Meyer, & Wagner, 2024) and motivated reasoning (Leeper & Slothuus, 2014). The TMP fills this gap by theorizing the relationship between parties and partisan-driven outcomes through changes in partisan attachments, from expressive to instrumental partisanship and vice versa. A key factor is how parties prime this expressive predisposition through their messages to the public.

Party cues may be the most common way to influence public opinion. They are messages that citizens rely on to infer and make political decisions (Bullock, 2011). Party cues inform citizens about parties' stances on policy issues and group affiliations to a party (Brader, Valentino & Suhay, 2008). Whereas a candidate's background can serve as a group cue for voters who seek alignment with social identifications (Campbell, Green, & Layman, 2011), a growing body of researchers has dedicated itself to studying parties' rhetoric in group and policy appeals. In essence, group-based appeals are cues with a direct strategy from parties to mobilize a segment of the electorate. These appeals are tailored messages that increase perceptions of alignment between groups and parties, which is more common with the possibility of segmenting the online electorate (Hersh & Schaffner, 2013). They emphasize group preferences and party priorities towards a specific group, often including statements about the kind of people who benefit from the party or which groups the party supports in their policy positions. Unlike candidates' backgrounds, party members do not need to share social identifications. Knowing that the party supports a favourable group or a traditional ally should be enough. However, whether these appeals are persuasive and benefit the party is unclear.

The informational values of group appeals are to increase awareness of alliances and gain support from shared affinities (e.g., Huber et al., 2024). Thus, these group appeals have an impact on group membership and voting decisions (Thau, 2021). For instance, Robison et al. (2021) demonstrate that appeals can effectively change preferences in the working class, which aligns with a party that targets this group. Moreover, group appeals can enhance awareness of a party's social composition, further prompting supporters to adjust and increase the significance of partisan identity in behavioural outcomes. However, the informational value can be limited by the targets of such appeals (Iyengar & Valentino, 2000). Targeted appeals are more likely to be effective when a party appeals to a group with a traditional connection, as these appeals are likely to be seen as credible and more easily accepted by partisan supporters. In contrast, targeted appeals toward groups allied with an out-party might be less accepted by in-party members.

In the TMP model, targeted appeals refer to group-based messages in which prior associations with the party can boost or diminish expressive partisanship strength. It differs from appeals based on

affinities, as the term 'targeted' emphasizes the strategic component of these party messages. I describe the effects of targeted appeals on expressive partisanship and forms of engagement separately. In Figure 1, the Directed Acyclic Graph (DAG) describes the pathway of these targeted appeals: how parties directly influence public opinion through attachments. This model emphasizes the role of parties in intensifying partisan identity and impacting the types of engagement that shape electoral performance. Therefore, a key attribute of group appeals in this model is to whom they are directed. Targeted appeals to core supporters underpin expressive partisanship by priming prior associations and group ties. Partisans are socialized to link the party label with the kinds of people that support the party. Targeted appeals to core supporters highlight membership and differentiation from other groups, thereby rendering the party's image as a feature in partisan considerations. In-targeting is this category of targeted appeals that enhances support from groups associated with the in-party, which is well-defined and the product of a longstanding group-party association.

Figure 1: Directed Acyclic Graph (DAG) for TMP Model
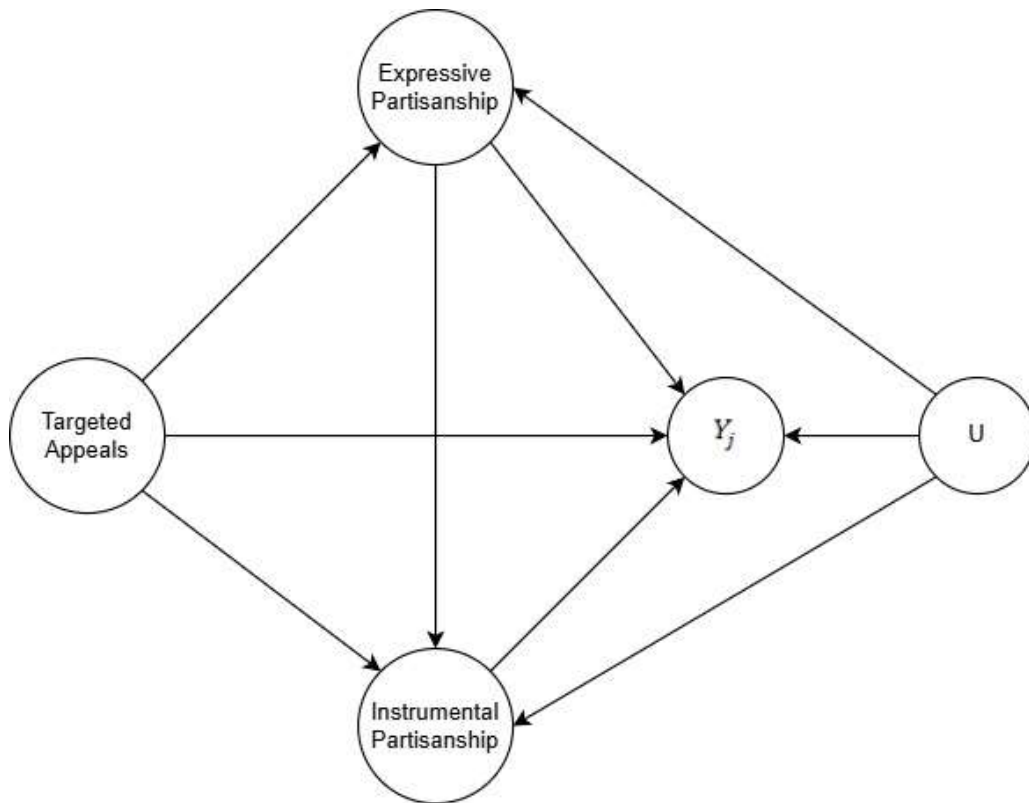
Notes: The DAG illustrates the causal path from targeted appeals (A) to outcomes (Y) through expressive partisanship (M_1) and instrumental partisanship (M_2). Finally, unobserved confounders (U) influence the mediators and the outcomes, biasing the causal pathways.

Nevertheless, suppose the party seeks a broader coalition due to challenging times or electoral opportunities, such as the opposition's vulnerabilities after scandals. Parties can adjust their strategies to match contextual scenarios and electoral opportunities to maximize benefits. Out-targeting reflects an appeal to groups in the opposition coalition, eventually creating out-group cross-pressures (e.g., Hillygus and Shields, 2008). On the other hand, partisan supporters, perceiving an out-group appeal, may notice

a proximity between their party and other groups, which can diminish their sense of differentiation (Lupu, 2013; 2016). Another possible type of appeal, which serves as a baseline for comparison with targeted appeals is broad appeals. Somer-Topcu (2015) defines broad appeals as a strategy that "can help parties gain votes, provided they can convince different groups of voters with diverse preferences that the party is now closer to their preferred ideological position" (p. 842). In group-based terms, broad appeals refer to target groups that do not have a clear association with any party. When using broad appeals, a party does not compromise with any side and projects an image of inclusiveness and moderation. Unlike targeted appeals, broad appeals do not rely on prior associations and are likely not to impact partisan attachments.

In the DAG above, the TMP predicts direct and indirect effects from targeted appeals on partisan attachments. When targeted appeals are perceived as in-targeting, they prime partisan identity from prior associations with group ties. The TMP argues that in-targeting will increase expressive attachment as supporters perceive the alignment between the in-party and traditional groups within the party image. Therefore, partisans will report more intense expressive attachments, since in-targeting emphasizes the prototypical membership through the kinds of people supporting the party. In contrast, out-targeting primes the proximity between the party and out-groups, which decreases the sense of differentiation from other parties. In turn, expressive attachments will be weaker. The TMP also assumes that expressive and instrumental attachments are interrelated. As some groups are associated with specific policies (e.g., women and social issues), instrumental attachments can increase through direct and enhanced expressive attachment. Out-targeting can also directly and indirectly affect instrumental partisanship, since benefits for specific groups can be considered unnecessary policy costs.

The TMP argues that partisanship mediates the effect of targeted appeals on behavioural outcomes. In this study, I explore the three outcomes predicted from the targeting effect and expressive partisanship. First, studies indicate that party rhetoric can shape polarization in the electorate (e.g., Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013). As targeted appeals prime the prototypical membership, the direct effect of these appeals is to increase the distance between liking the in-party and disliking the out-party. In the GSMP model, group sentiments toward the out-party partly influence partisan identity and, consequently, polarization. Expressive and instrumental attachments in this case represent the primary mechanisms of affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019). Second, partisanship mediates the effect of party strategy on voting, but it is not the primary mechanism in the Branding Model. Lupu (2016) argues that, after losing partisan identity, negative evaluations impact voting. In this case, the mediation effect of attachments is substantial, but not necessarily larger than the direct effect of party strategies. Lastly, partisan elites (Bisgaard & Slothuus, 2018) and expressive attachments (Bankert et al., 2017) fundamentally influence motivated reasoning. After in-targeting, partisan motivation plays out in reasoning, causing partisans to reach a conclusion that follows their identity rather than being accurate about political objects. In this form of engagement, partisan attachments are key mechanisms that drive the effect of party appeals on citizens' reasoning.

Overview and hypothesis testing

This study develops a model that explains expressive partisanship and how it drives polarization, motivated reasoning, and voting in support bases. Derived from the Branding Model and the GSMP, the

TMP emphasizes the role of parties through targeting with group priorities. Empirically, this study tests whether targeted appeals match, mismatch, or are non-matched with partisans' predisposition using different groups. Since prior association is the key factor in group cues, this study looks at the relative difference between group appeals based on previous perceptions of group-party associations. I test both in-targeting and out-targeting relative to the perception of broad appeals.

I test hypotheses that consider the impact of targeted appeals on expressive attachments relative to broad appeals. As the TMP model involves a group approach to partisanship, the focus here is on expressive attachment since the foundations of this attachment have been less understood. Expressive partisanship refers to belonging and differentiation across partisan and group identities. However, I also test how prior associations of targeted groups impact instrumental attachments. This view of partisanship refers to a 'running tally' of policy performances. Along with this analysis, I run alternative models with instrumental partisanship as the dependent variable. Therefore, the TMP posits the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (Targeted Appeal Hypothesis): Targeted appeals will impact expressive partisanship relative to broad appeals.

Hypothesis 1a (In-targeting Hypothesis): In-targeting appeals will increase expressive partisanship.

Hypothesis 1b (Out-targeting Hypothesis): Out-targeting appeals will decrease expressive partisanship.

Targeted appeals have been shown to predict multiple types of behaviour outcomes (e.g., Thau, 2021; Robison et al., 2021; Huber et al., 2024). The TMP model predicts that expressive and instrumental attachments drive the effects of targeted appeals on each behavioural outcome. As the model assumes that expressive partisanship dominates, I order these attachments so that the effect passes through the expressive attachment before the instrumental one. Further, I focus on comparisons between in-targeting and other appeals, examining whether influencing partisan attachments shapes engagement in different forms. Sometimes, the direct effect will be larger than the indirect effect. However, I expect the mediation effect of partisan attachments to be significant and positive. In all cases, I also examine the significance of the total and direct effects of targeting. Based on the literature and argumentation above, I therefore proceed with the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2 (Polarization Hypothesis): If partisan attachments increase, in-targeting will increase the difference between in- and out-parties' feelings.

Hypothesis 3 (Reasoning Hypothesis): In-targeting will increase directional motivations if partisan attachments increase.

Hypothesis 4 (Voting Loyalty Hypothesis): In-targeting will increase the likelihood of voting in one's party if partisan attachments increase.

DATA, DESIGN & MEASUREMENTS

To test the TMP model, I use experimental survey data about the Canadian party system. In Canada, party behaviour is central in explaining partisan attachments (e.g., Clarke et al., 2019). The long

tradition of brokerage politics, the party strategy of accumulating diverse interests across regions in policy agendas (Cross & Young, 2002), has downplayed partisan alignments (Cochrane, 2015). For this reason, the Canadian party system is the 'least likely' to see parties driving partisanship through group appeals. However, recent studies have shown that partisan attachments are durable even during difficult times (Gidengil et al., 2012), while accumulated evidence suggests a growing division and engagement in public opinion (Kevins & Soroka, 2018; Matthews & Pickup, 2019; Merkley, 2022). This trend remains a puzzle. Hence, the Canadian case can inform other contexts in which partisanship has been historically moderate, but new trends suggest an engaged and more divisive politics.

I designed an online survey experiment (N = 1,464) among Ontario residents from May 8 to 17, 2024, to collect responses about partisan attachments.[1] As this study focuses on partisan responses to targeted appeals, only participants who identified with a party during the survey are included in the analysis.[2] About 84% of the sample (n = 1,233) identified as Conservative, Liberal, or NDP. In this study, participants were exposed to group-based appeals from one of the three parties in a vignette and asked questions about their partisan attachments (i.e., expressive and instrumental ones). They also asked questions about party ratings, voting intentions, and reasoning about housing policy for motivated reasoning. The survey concludes with questions about political involvement and sociodemographics.

The experimental part of the survey highlights two critical items: party identification and prior associations. Party identification is collected by a standard measure ("In federal politics, do you usually think of yourself as a [party identification]?") or a follow-up question for participants who said, 'don't know' and 'prefer not to answer' ("Do you generally think of yourself as a little closer to one of the parties than the others? If yes, which party?"). In the vignettes, a party name was piped into the question to align with the respondent's party preference. Second, participants were asked to choose the party that best represented each group (i.e., Canadians, foreign workers, unions, business owners).[3] Prior associations were measured before the treatment in the survey, so they interacted with the group appeal and became a key factor. It fits with the conceptualization of targeted appeals, which refer to a subjective (mis)match between the message and the recipient's predisposition. Hence, targeted appeals are interacted with the prior group-party association questions to generate a measure of this matching.

Table 2 summarizes the given combinations of group-based appeals for each party. Participants were told that a hypothetical candidate was running for the party. In the experiment, I manipulated the named cleavages with different associations with the participant's party. Each vignette mentions the candidate using the quote: "We in the [**Party**] believe it is time for politicians to prioritize [**Group**]. As

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[1] This study initially surveyed 1,964 respondents from Ontario, Canada. However, participants were removed from this analysis due to not meeting the consent, citizenship, or age criteria (n = 283). Additionally, I removed participants due to the duration of their surveys (i.e., speeders are defined as those whose survey duration was a third of the median sample duration, n = 41) as well as participants who failed an attention check (n = 170).

[2] Supplementary Material, Appendix A, provides the demographic breakdown of this sample compared to the 2021 Canadian Census. Other partisans and non-identifiers received a random label with an appeal. Yet, they skipped the expressive scale. Instead, these participants answered questions about the centrality of their political identity, party evaluations, motivated reasoning, and vote choice. The Supplementary Material, Appendix B, presents the results for this scale.

[3] I present distributions only for the economic cleavages. The Supplementary Material, Appendix C, displays the full distribution of group-party associations for cleavages.

the candidate of the party, I will work to support [**Group**] in Canada." There can be a debate about whether "Canadians" are a neutral counterfactual condition for all other cleavages. Unlike the others used in the study, this cleavage can be claimed for any party without making the combination unrealistic.[4] Because I make this cleavage available for all three parties, and to make it more inclusive, as mentioned in the second party of the vignette, I use the term "everyone" to avoid potential segments that claim the national identity. For the other groups, I avoided deception by not pairing an unrealistic party with certain respective groups (e.g., the NDP candidate appealing to business owners). I paired each cleavage group with at least two parties, so each party's supporters had a one-third chance to be assigned to one cleavage.

Table 2: Combinations of Cleavages and Parties in Experimental Vignettes

PARTY	Canadians	Business Owners	Foreign Workers	Unionized Workers
Liberal Party	✓	✓	✓	X
Conservative Party	✓	✓	X	✓
NDP	✓	X	✓	✓

Notes: parties were paired with 'all Canadians' and two economic cleavages. The check mark refers to groups paired with the party. Supplemental Material C displays the distribution of people who associated parties with each cleavage.

I classify the matching appeals (T_i) based on the following:

$$T_i = Z_{ij} * A_{ij},$$

where Z_{ij} and A_{ij} refer to the appeal Z to targeted group j and the prior association with party A for each respondent i. Therefore, I classify targeted appeals as in-targeting when a group appeal matches with the individual respondent's association of the party and the targeted group. For example, a Conservative identifier who received an appeal to business owners and previously associated the group with the Conservative Party is classified as receiving an in-targeting appeal. Out-targeting is when group j in Z mismatches from group j in A for an individual respondent. This happens when a Conservative identifier received an appeal to unions and previously associated this targeted group with the NDP. Finally, I classify as broad appeals those participants who said "don't know" for the prior association question for the targeted group (i.e., non-match).

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[4] As the group-party associations will demonstrate, participants associate 'all Canadians' with a couple of parties, likely connecting all Canadians to anglophones. Future research should investigate whether the most effective wording for broad appeals is located within the vignettes and create a "pure control" for elite appeals.

In the post-treatment survey, I asked participants about their expressive partisanship using the eight-item scale developed by Huddy et al. (2015). The Expressive Scale provides information about the strength of partisan identity in psychological and emotional terms. Through the items, the scale inquires about emotional involvement and feelings of connection between the individual and the party. The expressive scale exhibits good consistency ($\alpha = 0.86$) and a moderate sample average ($\bar{X} = 0.558$, s.e. = 0.005).[5] For the first hypothesis, I estimate a conditioned average treatment effect on expressive partisanship between in-targeting and out-targeting relative to the broad appeals. I expect that in the in-targeting scenario, the estimator will be positive ($\beta > 0$). As discussed earlier, I expect that in the out-targeting scenario, the same estimator will be negative ($\beta < 0$).

In this study, I also examine instrumental partisanship using a five-item scale that assesses positions on social justice and redistribution.[6] This scale presents statements with which participants were asked to agree or disagree. It includes statements like "Government should redistribute income from those who are better off" and "There is one law for the rich and one for the poor." I coded as more progressive those who agree with a greater 'need for social justice and redistribution' and as more conservative those who disagree with these 'values.' This way, Conservatives have an inverted scale relative to Liberals and NDP to reflect the conservative positions. Conservatives with more conservative values in these items should have a greater instrumental attachment. The two progressive parties do not differ from each other. Although Liberals historically have more moderate views, researchers have shown that these parties are more congenial around these issues (e.g., Cochrane, 2015). The instrumental scale combines this scale with ideological intensity (i.e., a folded version of the ideological spectrum). The instrumental scale demonstrates acceptable consistency and a moderate average ($\bar{X} = 0.563$, s.e. = 0.004).

The other three hypotheses compare whether in-targeting treatment impacts polarization, reasoning, and voting through attachments. To test for the mediation effect of partisanship, I decompose the total impact of targeting into a path-specific effect (PSE) approach (Zhou & Yamamoto, 2023). This approach enables testing for multiple mediators and the sensitivity analysis of potential unobserved confounders between the mediator and outcome. The PSE estimators demonstrate the significance of targeting in producing partisan engagement and show the contribution of each mediator — expressive and instrumental partisanship — without assuming independence between these types of attachments. For the second hypothesis, I measure affective polarization using thermometers about each party in federal elections.[7] I calculate the standard deviation of these ratings and weights based on the previous vote share. For the third hypothesis, I measure motivated reasoning by evaluating arguments about housing prices caused by international students across communities in Ontario. Without suggesting political positions, participants responded to whether the argument can be correct, positing a causal relationship based on the sample presented in the preface.[8] Participants who agree with the argument

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[5] It also demonstrates good consistency for each party. For the Liberals, the alpha is 0.87, while for the Conservatives and NDP, it is 0.85 each.

[6] Supplementary Material, Appendix D, displays the wording for the expressive and instrumental partisanship scales along with their proportion by item. It also compares the traditional measure of partisanship strength.

[7] Except for the Bloc Québécois, which only runs the federal elections in Quebec.

[8] The vignette for the motivated reasoning reads: "Here's one recent argument about housing prices in Canada. We want to know how **weak** or **strong** you believe the argument is. Please put aside your feelings about housing prices and be as objective as possible. Experts have been talking about whether the rising number of international students is causing

without considering the validity of the sample and causality display directional over accurate motivations on the salient topic (Guay & Johnston, 2022). In this case, I coded as motivated reasoners those who judge as 'weak' or 'stronger' with the argument without considering external or internal validity. Finally, the fourth hypothesis examines voting intentions in non-electoral years ("If an election were held tomorrow, which party do you think you would vote for?"). I calculated the likelihood of in-party voting after targeting, mediated by partisanship.

To maximize statistical power, the experiment analyzed did not include a 'no appeal' condition that would work as a control. This design limitation should be addressed in future research. Thus, the interpretation of the treatment effect relates to the difference between targeted groups, which speaks to the prior association between the group and party, instead of the absolute effect of group appeals. Further, I test the effect of targeting across groups with different behavioural outcomes. These outcomes relate to forms of political engagement and include polarization, reasoning and in-party voting. These are all consequences presented in the models that provided insights for the TMP.

Online survey experiments require questions about the effectiveness of manipulation. Did participants pay attention to the cleavage in the targeted appeals? The uncontrolled environment and risks of inattentive participants threaten the findings' internal and external validity. Manipulation checks assess participants' attention to experimental manipulations. Following Kane and Barabas (2019), I included three checks in the survey to examine whether participants paid attention to the study overall and the targeted group in particular. First, I asked participants to choose the youngest political figure from a list while mentioning the youngest politician on the alternatives list.[9] This check aims to identify participants who were attentive to instructions. Second, I asked for perceptions about parties' proximity to groups' interests (see Grant and Evans, 2023).[10] Each party has four response points, ranging from "not at all closely" (1) to "very closely" (4). I ran an ANOVA between the average response of participants who received each group treatment. In this check, I verify if participants' perceptions of party-group connections changed after the manipulation. Finally, I asked participants if they recalled which group the fictitious candidate appealed to. This check directly assesses whether participants were attentive to a specific aspect of the manipulated content.

In the first check, 115 participants, about 9% of the original sample, failed to select the youngest politician on the list. They were removed from the analyses in this study. The question about party-group connections, the second manipulation check, suggests that the manipulations were successful. Except for appeals to union workers, the remaining ANOVA tests reach statistical significance ($p < 0.05$). Evaluations about group-party proximity differ between those who received one group and those who received another group. I tested differences within the same party across cleavages, which are also significant ($p < 0.05$). This suggests that alteration of perceptions after the experimental manipulation likely remained confined to the specific party and cleavage. In the last manipulation check, only 43% of

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housing prices to go up [down]. Some experts looked at housing costs in 20 cities with international students and 20 cities without them. They argued that in cities with more international students, house prices increased [decreased] by 30% compared to cities without them."

[9] In the preface, I inform participants that: "paying attention and reading the instructions carefully are critical."

[10] This question reads: "Some people say that all political parties look after certain groups and are not so concerned about others. How closely do you think the [**Party**] looks after the interests of [**Group**]."

the sample correctly indicated which group was presented. However, the in- and out-targeting effects remain statistically significant (p < 0.05). Although the difference between targeted appeals attains marginal significance (p = 0.07), the effect of in-targeting remains larger. Thus, the manipulation check findings suggest that the results of the study should be robust to issues of attention.

RESULTS

The effect of targeted appeals on partisan attachments

I begin this analysis by describing prior associations between cleavages and Canadian parties in the sample. Figure 2 illustrates the distributions of these associations. The sample's most common association is between the Conservative Party and business owners (66%; χ² (5) = 2478.3, p < 0.001). The second most common association with business owners is the Liberal Party, at around 14%. In the reported associations with foreign workers, the Liberal Party is the most commonly associated (44%; χ² (5) = 933.47, p < 0.001), followed by the NDP with 21%. Union workers are associated with the NDP in significant and large proportions (53%; χ² (5) = 1500.4, p < 0.001), followed by the Liberal Party at 19% and the Conservative Party at 13%. This distribution of associations remains unchanged when broken down by partisan affiliation (in and out-partisans). The most interesting distribution of group-party associations is for "Canadians". Despite the large proportions of respondents who responded 'don't know' about this association, some participants associated Canadians with a single party. That a national label remains associated with parties by many means, it does not work as it should to be considered a pure experimental control.

**Figure 2: Distribution of Group-Party Associations**
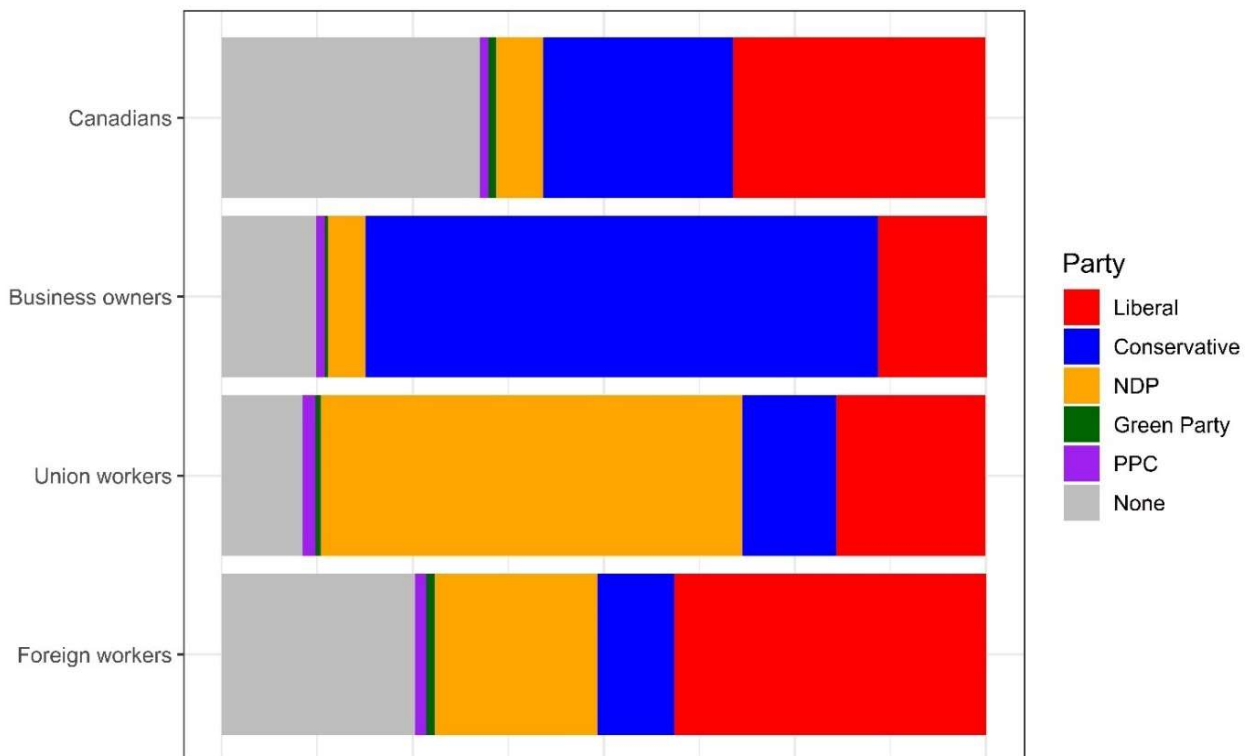
Considering broad appeals, among those who reported no associations with a party (n = 593), they are more frequent from appeals using 'Canadians' as a group. Examining expressive and instrumental attachments, participants reported a moderate average of $\bar{X} = 0.504$ (s.e. = 0.006) for expressive partisanship and $\bar{X} = 0.567$ (s.e. = 0.011) for instrumental partisanship. (, I can compare the in- and out-targeting treatments, which correspond to when a participant's targeted group has a prior association with a party. In the in-targeting treatment (n = 349), participants associated the targeted group with their party. As expected, the average expressive attachment for participants in this treatment is significantly higher ($\bar{X} = 0.632$, s.e. = 0.008) but the lowest instrumental one of the treatments ($\bar{X} = 0.552$, s.e. = 0.013). The out-targeting treatment (n = 291), in which participants associated the targeted group with another party, reports a lower average expressive attachment ($\bar{X} = 0.579$, s.e. = 0.008) and high instrumental partisanship ($\bar{X} = 0.568$, s.e. = 0.014).

To test the Targeted Appeal Hypothesis (H1), I compare the effects of in- and out-targeted appeals with the effects of broad appeal treatments across group-based conditions. Figure 3 displays the treatment effects by targeting treatments. Confirming the hypothesis, the prior association between the targeted group and party matters. As suggested by the In-targeting Hypothesis (H1a), an in-targeting treatment increases expressive attachments relative to broad appeals. The targeted appeals to core supporters suggest a proximity between the party's image and the group that has an impact on attachments. The effect size is relatively large and is statistically significant ($\beta = 0.09$; $p < 0.001$; 95% CI: [0.07 to 0.10]). This effect for expressive attachment is not reflected in instrumental attachment. Instrumental attachment increases relative to broad appeals, but the margins are not statistically significant. In contrast to the results for H1a, the result does not confirm the direction of the Out-targeting Hypothesis (H1b), which expected the out-targeting treatment to decrease partisanship relative to broad appeals. The effect size is positive, and the difference is statistically significant ($\beta = 0.05$; $p < 0.001$; 95% CI: [0.03 to 0.07]). Again, instrumental attachments do not differ significantly between the out-targeting treatment and broad appeals. Comparing the effect sizes across treatments, expressive attachments in the in-targeting treatment are statistically higher than out-targeting, as expected ($\beta = 0.04$; $p < 0.001$, 95% CI: [0.02 to 0.06]).

To summarize, I examined the impact of targeted appeals on expressive and instrumental attachments. Targeted appeals are group-based messages that prime expressive attachments when prior associations between the group cleavage and a political party exist. The group-based appeals interacted with the priors, impacting how partisans assess their political identity. Appeals to core support groups lead to more expressive attachments than opposition groups or groups without a clear connection ($p < 0.001$). Although it might decrease differences between parties' coalitions, and thus dilute a party brand, an out-targeting treatment is not less effective than broad appeals in increasing expressive partisanship ($p < 0.001$). In contrast, out-targeting reflects more intense expressive partisanship than broad appeals.

Figure 3: Targeting Effect on Partisan Attachments
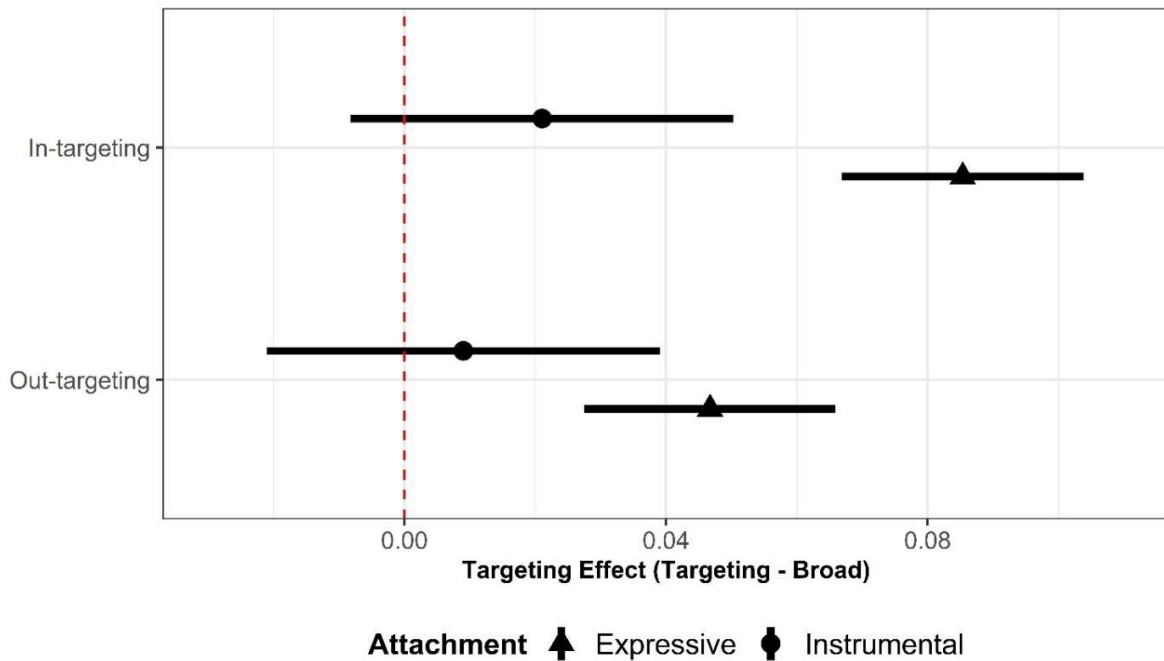
Notes: The results present the average expressive and instrumental partisanship effects estimated by individual OLS models, controlling for social group, party identification, age, gender, education, union status, birthplace in Canada, and political involvement (holding these variables at their mean values). The confidence interval (CI) is calculated using the 95% confidence level. The expressive and instrumental partisanship scales have been rescaled to range from 0 to 1. The in-targeting effect refers to the difference between in-targeting and broad appeal conditions. The out-targeting effect refers to the difference between out-targeting and broad appeal conditions.

One of the main extensions of the TMP relative to the Branding and GSMP models is how the model considers group ties interacted with partisan attachments. Previous studies neither consider group ties nor tested assumptions with a multiple group cleavages. I examine whether these groups create heterogeneity in the targeted appeals' effects. Some groups have stronger ties with a single party, while others have weaker ones. For example, more respondents associated business owners with the Conservative Party (66%) than foreign workers with the Liberal Party (44%). Among all groups, the business owners in broad appeals exhibit lower expressive partisanship (n = 157, $\bar{X} = 0.496$, s.e. = 0.013), followed by foreign workers (n = 150, $\bar{X} = 0.504$, s.e. = 0.013) and union workers (n = 103, $\bar{X} = 0.506$, s.e. = 0.014). For the in-targeting treatment, there is a high average treatment effect among business owners (n = 96, $\bar{X} = 0.646$, s.e. = 0.016), Canadians (n = 150, $\bar{X} = 0.632$, s.e. = 0.012, and foreign workers (n = 66, $\bar{X} = 0.616$, s.e. = 0.018). Averaging across all groups, in-targeting perceptions have a higher average expressive partisanship than the other two targeted appeals. In the out-targeting scenario, the highest average is for treatments that mentioned unionized workers (n = 68, $\bar{X} = 0.601$, s.e. = 0.019), followed by business owners (n = 80, $\bar{X} = 0.597$, s.e. = 0.015) and foreign workers (n = 68, $\bar{X} = 0.568$, s.e. = 0.017).

Figure 4 displays the treatment effect by targeted cleavage. Across cleavages, in-targeting consistently has a positive impact relative to broad appeals ($p < 0.01$). Being exposed to in-targeted business owners increases expressive attachments significantly compared to perceiving this cleavage as without association ($\beta = 0.1$; $p < 0.001$; 95% CI: [0.06 to 0.13]). Nevertheless, the effects of out-targeted appeals seem less consistently different from broad appeals using the same group cleavage. For those with less frequent associations (i.e., foreign workers and Canadians), the effects of out-targeting do not differ from broad appeals. Conversely, groups with stronger associations with a single party in the sample have a significant impact compared to broad appeals. Participants exposed to out-targeted appeals regarding union workers ($\beta = 0.06$; $p < 0.01$; 95% CI: [0.02 to 0.10]) and business owners ($\beta = 0.08$; $p < 0.001$; 95% CI: [0.05 to 0.12]) have significant effects compared to broad appeals. Unlike the in-targeting treatment, these results suggest that out-targeting effects are more complex and depend upon identifying the cleavage as a clear and close supporter of the competitor party.

Figure 4: Targeting Effect by Group Appeal
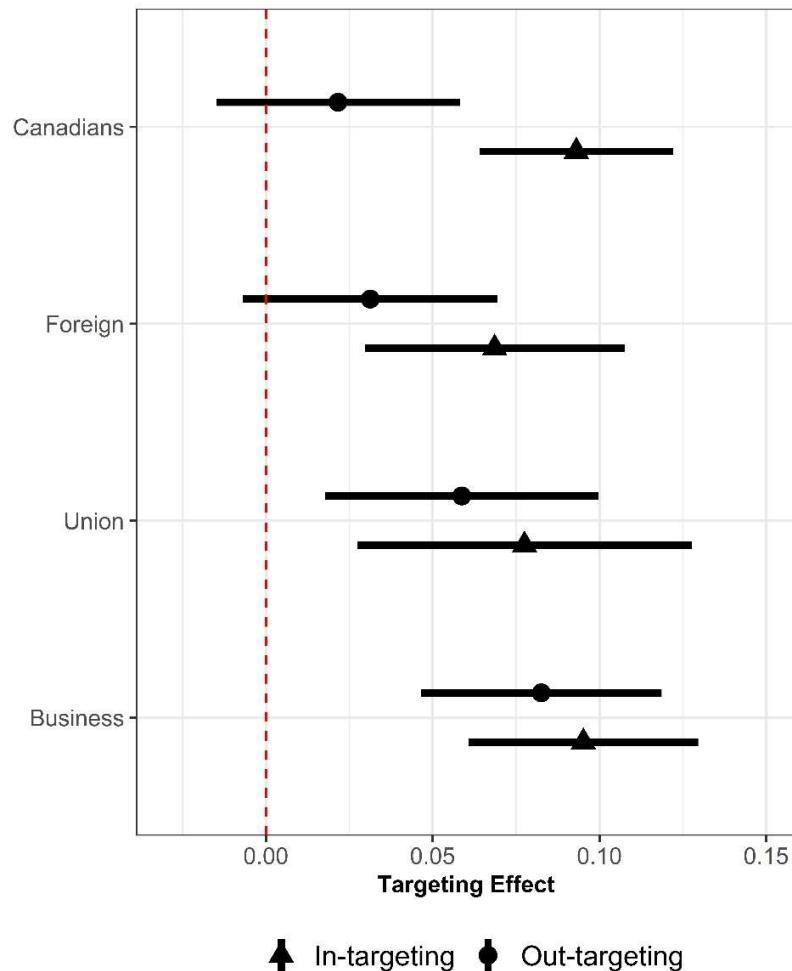
Notes: The results show the level of expressive partisanship, estimated by the interaction between targeting and group presented in the vignette, in an OLS model that controls for party identification, age, gender, education, union status, birthplace in Canada and political involvement (holding these variables at their mean values). The confidence interval (CI) is calculated using the 95% confidence level.

The effect of targeted appeals on behaviour through partisanship

To what extent do partisan attachments connect elite appeals to polarization, reasoning, and voting loyalties? Previous models often relate partisanship to these behavioural outcomes. For example, the Branding Model begins with the concern that established parties in Latin American democracies suddenly declined in vote shares (p. 1). The model suggests that partisanship mediates the effects of relative policy agendas on voting loyalties. As previously discussed, a growing body of research relates group appeals to decision-making processes (e.g., Huber, Meyer & Wagner, 2024). The model proposes that elite strategies (i.e., targeted appeals) have direct and indirect effects, through partisan attachments, on behaviour outcomes. Those identified with the party are more attuned to group cues and have better knowledge of group-party associations, which helps them to understand the party's strategies better insofar as who is a prototypical partisan member. Hence, I examine partisan attachments (expressive and instrumental partisanship) as factors through which elite rhetoric influences voters' behaviour. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time causal mediator analysis has been used to identify partisan attachments as causal mechanisms for the elite-mass linkage.

Unlike previous models of partisanship, one assumption of the TMP is that expressive and instrumental attachments are interdependent. Although instrumental partisanship may influence expressive attachments, a large body of work suggests that instrumental attachments may actually follow expressive partisanship (e.g., Dancey & Goren, 2010; Dias & Lelkes, 2021). Adopting this assumption, I use the path-specific estimation from Zhou and Yamamoto (2023) in the multi-mediator scenario. The PSE approach detects each mediator's strength as a causal path for the outcomes. The advantage of using PSE in this article is that this method does not assume independence between these attachment mediators. For each outcome, it decomposes the total effect of in-targeting (1 for in-targeting and 0, otherwise) into three causal paths: i) direct effects (In-targeting $\rightarrow Y_j$) refers to the effect of in-targeting on the outcome; ii) effect through expressive and instrumental partisanship (In-targeting $\rightarrow$ Attachments $\rightsquigarrow Y_j$), whose estimator reflects the role of expressive and instrumental attachments, in this order, in transmitting the in-targeting effects; and iii) effects through only instrumental partisanship (A $\rightarrow$ Instrumental PID $\rightsquigarrow Y_j$), whose estimator reflects the contribution of instrumental partisanship to the effect of group appeals.

The following analysis focuses on the three causal paths, focusing on when partisan attachments impact the outcomes of party appeals. Except for in-party voting, I ran OLS models on affective polarization (H2) and motivated reasoning (H3), comparing in-targeting with both out-targeting and broad appeals.[11] I ran a logit model for in-party voting (H4), as the dependent variable is dichotomous. Table 3 presents the results of the PSE decomposition of effects. Recall that I hypothesized a positive causal mediation effect of in-targeting on affective polarization through partisan attachments, and possibly a remaining average direct effect as well. The results confirm my expectations. The estimated PSE through partisan attachments is 0.030 (p < 0.001), which is significant and 3 percentage points larger than the mediator for instrumental attachment alone (p = 0.95). The direct effect of in-targeting is also

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[11] Alternatively, I ran the same analysis excluding participants that perceived a broad appeal treatment and find similar results.

significant (p < 0.05), but smaller than the pathway through partisan attachments. This result suggests that partisanship is the primary mechanism of elite appeals influencing affective polarization.

Table 3: Estimates of Total and PSEs of Targeting on Behavioural Outcomes

	Estimate
Affective polarization (Y_1)	
Total effect (TE)	0.048 [0.030; 0.067] ***
Through expressive partisanship (A $\rightarrow M_1 \rightsquigarrow Y_1$)	0.030 [0.023; 0.038] ***
Through instrumental partisanship (A $\rightarrow M_2 \rightsquigarrow Y_1$)	0.000 [-0.007; 0.007]
Direct effect (A $\rightarrow Y_1$)	0.018 [0.001; 0.035] *
Motivated reasoning (Y_2)	
Total effect (TE)	0.066 [-0.026; 0.154]
Through expressive partisanship (A $\rightarrow M_1 \rightsquigarrow Y_2$)	0.034 [0.003; 0.070] *
Through instrumental partisanship (A $\rightarrow M_2 \rightsquigarrow Y_2$)	0.013 [-0.022; 0.045]
Direct effect (A $\rightarrow Y_2$)	0.019 [-0.081; 0.112]
In-party voting (Y_3)	
Total effect (TE)	0.126 [0.082; 0.176] ***
Through expressive partisanship (A $\rightarrow M_1 \rightsquigarrow Y_3$)	0.054 [0.035; 0.074] ***
Through instrumental partisanship (A $\rightarrow M_2 \rightsquigarrow Y_3$)	-0.016 [-0.043; 0.006]
Direct effect (A $\rightarrow Y_3$)	0.088 [0.038; 0.148] ***

*p: * < .05, ** < .01, *** < .001. Notes: These results were calculated using the 'paths' package in R (Zhou & Yamamoto, 2023). The results show the average total effect estimated by OLS, controlling for party identification, age, gender, education, union status, birthplace in Canada, and political involvement. In brackets, 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals are represented (based on 1,000 iterations).*

For the Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis (H3), I hypothesized that targeted appeals could affect motivated (directional) reasoning through expressive partisanship. The result does not confirm the hypothesis. The impact of elite appeals is only significant through expressive partisanship (p < 0.05), increasing motivated reasoning by 3.4 percentage points, while the other pathways do not reach statistical significance. These findings suggest that expressive partisanship is likely a meaningful mechanism that fuels directional reasoning, despite the insignificant targeted appeals effect.

Turning to in-party voting, in-targeting appeals are expected to enhance the likelihood of in-party voting through attachments and also through a direct effect of targeted appeals. The results confirm the Voting Loyalty Hypothesis (H4). The primary mediator is partisan attachments, which increase the likelihood of in-party voting by 5.4 percentage points (p < 0.001). Once again, instrumental partisanship alone does not reach statistical significance for this causal mediation. In-targeting significantly influences the probability of in-party voting with an 8.8 percentage point difference (p < 0.001). The most significant effect on voting is from the direct effect of in-targeting relative to out-targeting and broad appeals. As predicted in the Branding Model, the decline of partisan identity is insufficient to explain changes in voting decisions.

Since partisan attachments have been established as mechanisms for at least two outcomes tested here, a subsequent concern is to what extent these results substantively account for unmeasured confounders (U). Random assignments partially prevent confounders from influencing the relationship between manipulation (A) and mediators, but not estimations from the mediator to the outcome (Bullock, Green, and Ha, 2010). The sensitivity analysis enables the examination of whether the PSE is sensitive to confoundedness.[12] The most substantial result is the effect of in-targeting on polarization through partisan attachments. Hence, I focus on the negative relationship between the parameters of different values of the confounder effects on affective polarization and the conditional distribution between in-targeting and other treatments. Figure 5 illustrates the contours of bias-adjusted estimates. Since the PSE estimator is positive, the result for the mediator is potentially underestimated. The effect of in-targeting on polarization through attachments might be larger, which suggests that the findings for affective polarization are robust.[13]

One caveat about the sensitivity analysis of causal mediation analysis is that there are no objective criteria to guide when the relationship is sensitive to confoundedness. A feasible possibility is to include covariates already observed. As long as the unmeasured confounders need to be more extreme than the covariates, this suggests that these confounders are rare (Hu, 2025, p. 96). Based on the literature of partisan identity and affective polarization, two confounders are included in the sensitivity analysis. First, political involvement reflects whether politics are a central part of a participant's life. (Krupnikov and Ryan, 2022).[14] Those deeply involved in politics tend to develop more animosity toward opposing party members, and they exhibit intense attachments to the in-party (Huddy et al., 2015). The second observed covariate is group affect. In the GSMP model, group affect predicts partisan attachment. A recent study has indicated that group affect is central to explaining the effectiveness of appeals on polarization (Huber, Meyer, and Wagner, 2021). For the following analysis, I coded political involvement and group affect as binaries around their median values.

As Figure 5 shows, the estimates for the two covariates are far less extreme than the unobserved confounder area. This is evidence that a confounder has to be extreme to shift the substantive conclusion. The original estimate for the effect through attachments is 0.030, which is quite robust as its covariates

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[12] It calculates bias-adjusted estimates from the plausible values of the effect of these confounders on the outcomes, as well as the conditional distribution of confounders between treated and untreated conditions.

[13] In Supplementary Material, Appendix E, I present the sensitivity analyses for motivated reasoning and in-party voting.

[14] To date, this is the first time the Political Involvement Scale has been used in Canada. A positive and strong correlation exists between political involvement and expressive partisanship (r = 0.52), as expected.

are outside the shaded area of the graph. For the estimator to be considered completely biased, and have the substantive conclusion overturned, an unobserved confounder should have an extreme negative effect on affective polarization and a substantial presence in the in-targeting treatment rather than out-targeting or broad appeals. Meanwhile, the conclusion that expressive attachment is a primary mechanism through which elite appeals influence affective polarization is quite robust.

Figure 5: Bias-adjusted Estimates of the PSE on Polarization through Partisanship
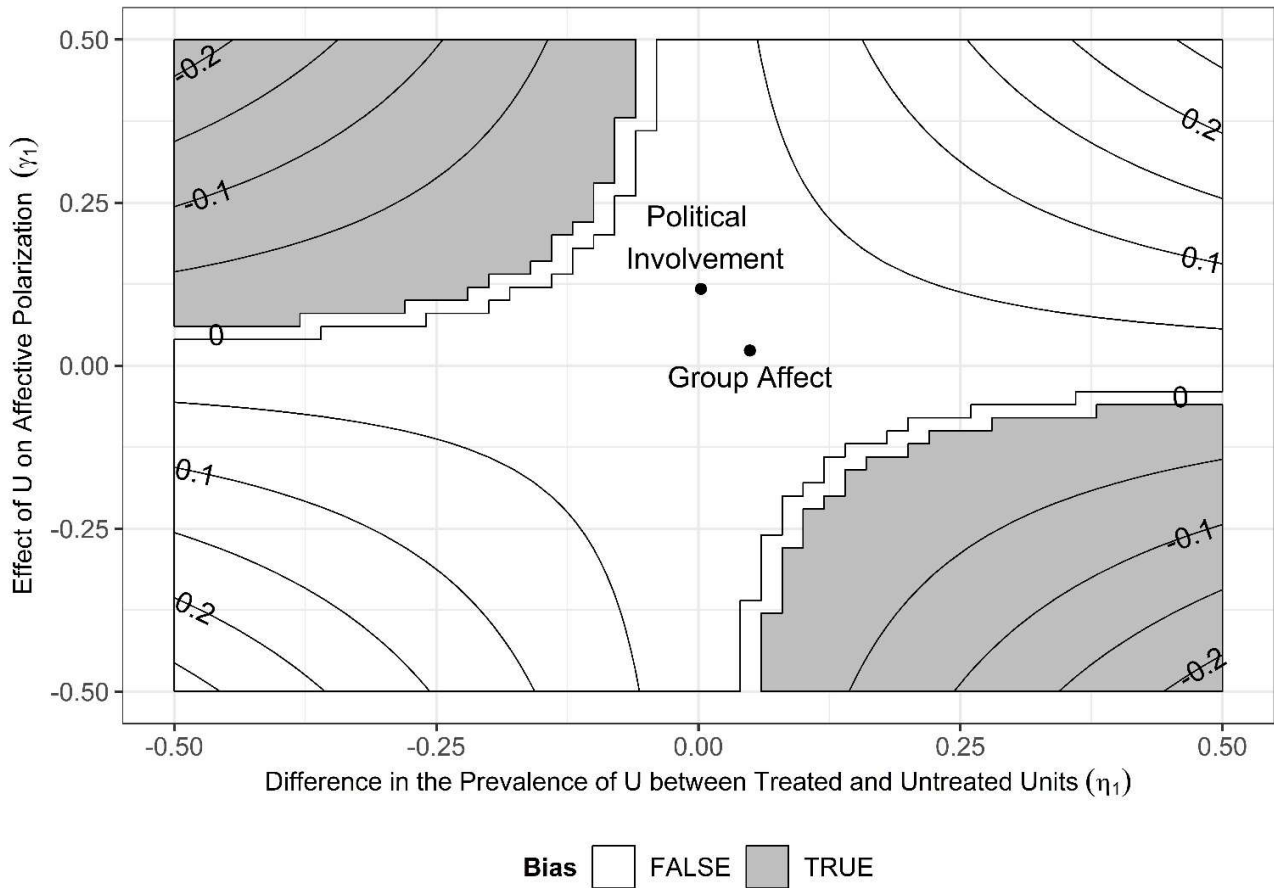
Notes: Based on Zhou and Yamamoto (2023), the contours represent the bias-adjusted estimates of the effect through partisanship plotted as a function of -γ1η1 parameters. The grey area shows the values of γ1 and η1 that would reverse the sign of the $A \rightarrow M_1 \rightsquigarrow Y_1$. The parameters γ1 and η1 were allowed to vary from -0.5 to 0.5 with a step size of 0.01. The annotated points represent the γ1 and η1 values that would result if the unobserved variables U "worked exactly like" one of the observed covariates in terms of their confounding effect on the mediator-outcome relationship. They help to sense how extreme the values of confounders would need to be to reverse the sign of the mediator effect.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article was designed to investigate under which conditions partisans can be more divided across parties, motivated by parties, and loyal to their party. Despite extensive research, the mechanisms behind partisan attachments and their consequences remain unclear. Since Social Identity Theory was first used to identify partisanship as a central factor explaining behaviour, expressive partisanship has

received more attention in political science. In this article I propose the TMP, which emphasizes expressive and instrumental attachments as mediators from elite messages to behavioural outcomes. I conducted a survey experiment in which I manipulated appeals to different groups with distinctive perceptions of prior association with the main Canadian parties. I find that prior associations matter for partisan attachments. Expressive attachments increase when in-targeting occurs, that is when a party targets specific groups that have longstanding connections to the party. In turn, partisan attachments transmitted the effects of elite appeals to affective polarization and a significant part of the effects to in-party voting. Hence, partisans have become more divided and loyal because party strategy with core supporters boosts attachments among partisan voters, rather than expanding constituencies or addressing broad appeals.

The TMP model contributes to the current literature on elite strategies and partisan attachments. First, it provides empirical support for the strategic approach of group appeals, in which the informative value of appeals is conditioned by prior associations between group and party. Elite strategies can still make predispositions salient, for example, informing voters about group affinities. Moreover, a party communication strategy to appeal to a specific group can prime these predispositions since it targets well-known groups which are products of longstanding association with the party (e.g., Tesler, 2015). Second, the current study shows the total effects of party appeals on voting (Thau, 2021) and polarization (Robison et al., 2021; Huber, Meyer, & Wagner, 2024). The indirect effects of decomposing the targeting effects through partisan attachments are more substantive than the direct effects on affective polarization. Third, the TMP proposes that political parties play an integral role in the foundations of partisan attachments. The Branding Model emphasizes the effects of expanding policy positions toward the opposition agenda and away from the party image on the decline of partisanship and voting (Lupu, 2013; 2016). By comparison, my model differentiates in-targeting, out-targeting, and broad appeals regarding the influence on partisanship. Beyond the individual motivations, it can explain the nuances of partisanship across countries, as well as among partisan groups. At least for partisan attachments, the TMP finally challenges the rational idea that broad appeals benefit parties more than pandering to a segment of the electorate (e.g., Hersh & Schaffner, 2013; Somer-Topcu, 2015). Aligned with the traditional group approach in partisan identity, broad appeals contributed to the lowest levels of partisan attachments relative to in- or out-targeting.

These findings have important implications for normative concerns about democratic governance. As long as group cues enhance convergence and stability in voting decisions (Levendusky, 2010), evidence suggests that reinforcing expressive attachments enhances cheerleading and loathing toward opposition members (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2019). With partisan stereotypes limiting the information value of group cues, group appeals might help voters to report partisanship instead of their preferences. In-targeting seems to prompt partisans to assume a more "prototypical" role. The fact that partisans reward in-targeting with more expressive attachments, rather than incorporating new cleavages, indicates that identity politics are strong and that preserving the boundaries of belonging as well as a sense of differentiation are fundamental. Unfortunately, this trend indicates undesirable outcomes for democratic pluralism (e.g., Dahl, 1961).

A few questions persist, however. Although the groups sampled were more extensive than previous studies, the current study does not cover the full range of group-party associations. This design avoids odd combinations of parties that never appeal to a specific group. For example, it omitted an NDP appeal to business owners. Using topic sampling (Clifford & Rainey, 2022), a design with an extended list of groups could reveal the dynamics of partisanship across different associations and group attributes (e.g., salience) that might be strongly associated with partisan identities. This study focused only on intra-party messages. Partisans often consume news about their party, but also about the other parties. This implies that strategies might also influence perceptions about partisan identity among the out-party (Kane, Mason & Wronski, 2021). That being said, a design for a second study that makes cross-targeting possible would benefit from exploring the extension of targeting effects. Finally, this design manipulates groups in targeted appeals. It neither has a clear control condition nor manipulates prior associations. In the next step, a third study could include prior group-party connections and a 'no appeal' condition, including group affect questions before the manipulation to distinguish the effect of affinities in expressive partisanship.

In short, future research should explore the nuances of the TMP. Although group affinities and prior associations likely correlate, there is a debate on whether partisans can identify the party's coalition or if it is biased (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Orr & Hurber, 2021). The TMP must consider both mechanisms, manipulating controversial groups that conflict with affinities and associations. Another important contribution that requires more investigation is about broad appeals. In the current model, broad appeal treatments had the lowest level of expressive attachments, rather than appeals to opposing groups. Therefore, it suggests a scenario of brand dilution related to broadening appeals rather than aligning with the out-party. Finally, I included "Canadians" with the broadest appeal in the group sampled, but it was identified as an in-group and an out-group by a few respondents. Besides adding a "no appeal" condition, future research should be dedicated to investigating whether appeals for "the nation" or "the people" effectively broaden a party's appeal. This study is relevant in Canada due to the plural and distinct perceptions of "Canadians" across Quebec and First Nations territories.

The TMP implies that elites with group cues can shape partisanship and impact outcomes in polarization and voting loyalties. Together with the growing literature of group-based appeals, these findings should encourage experts to consider partisanship beyond personal characteristics and as a strategic asset during campaigns. In difficult times, parties can rely on core supporters and boost partisanship to protect these votes from bad performances or unfavourable events. On the other hand, expanding constituencies has a cost regarding partisan loyalties, cautioning against such a strategy for the long-term benefits of partisanship. A problem is that in-targeting can generate undesirable and adverse outcomes for democratic governance. However, as parties can manage their partisanship through appeal strategies, the TMP offers a more optimistic perspective at the end of the day. Experts can figure out institutional designs that encourage cross-partisan appeals, maintaining levels of partisan engagement with accountability. In some designs, the current scenario favours social sorting, where parties reinforce group associations and strengthen expressive partisanship indefinitely. The ideal would be a competitive system that requires parties to switch and broaden their appeals to new constituencies to leverage support.

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Soliciting Commitment: How Political Parties Shape Partisan Attachments

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Table of Contents

A. Sample demographic breakdown

In this study, I conducted an online survey experiment (N = 1,464) among Ontario residents from May 8 to 17, 2024. I hired Léger Opinion and participated in all stages of the data collection, following the best practices in survey research. Despite the experimental design, the data collection was not based on probability-based techniques, increasing the biases associated with sampling citizens from different socioeconomic categories, educational levels, and ages.

Table A1: Sample descriptive statistics

Variable		Study 1 2024	Ontario 2021
Gender	*Female*	729 (50.2%)	(50.7%)
	Male	722 (49.8%)	(49.3%)
Age in years		51.3	41.6
Education	*No school*	1 (0.1%)	(10%)
	High school	167 (11.4%)	(23%)
	College	291 (19.8%)	(25%)
	Bachelor's degree	502 (34.1%)	(33%)
Survey Mode		*online*	
N		1,470 (100.0%)	

Source: 2021 Canadian census. The percentages included for education represent participants with completed degrees. The sample is unweighted.

Table A1 presents descriptive statistics for the study sample, benchmarked against the 2021 Canadian census for Ontario. The sample's gender breakdown is very close to the census distribution. As expected, the distribution of age and educational attainment underrepresents lower levels. In the sample, the average age is higher than the Ontario population (51% and 41%). Moreover, I sampled a close proportion of those with Bachelors degrees relative to the population. Therefore, the evidence in this study should be considered in light of the sample characteristics and limitations that stem from it.

B. Does Targeting Influence Expressive Responses of Non-partisans?

When participants denied any party identification in the standard and follow-up questions, they were not included in the analysis presented in the main body of the paper. However, the question remains: do targeted appeals also impact expressive responses from non-partisans? Federico and Ekstrom (2018) define political-identity centrality as "the extent that one's political preferences are central to the self-concept" (p. 901). This factor has an expressive function of saying more about who the participant is by reflecting core aspects of personality. Hence, participants without a political affiliation may still hold politics as central to their self-concept.

Table B1 displays the multi-item scale for political identity centrality. In the survey, non-partisans received this scale instead of the expressive scale. This scale involves questions about the importance of political attitudes and the relevance of beliefs in defining the individual. I combined the items and rescaled them to vary between 0 and 1. About 237 participants, 16% of the sample, received such a scale, which presents a moderate average and a good internal consistency.

Table B1: Multi-item of political-identity centrality

Item	Question-wording
#1	Overall, my political attitudes and beliefs have very little to do with how I feel about myself.
#2	My political attitudes and beliefs are an important reflection of who I am.
#3	My political attitudes and beliefs are unimportant to my sense of what kind of person I am.
#4	In general, my political attitudes and beliefs are an important part of my self-image.
$\bar{x}$ (S.E.)	0.499 (0.017)
α	0.86

Note: All items were combined to generate a scale that ranges from low (0) to high (1).

I ran an OLS model that includes targeted and broad appeals (here, it does not matter if it is in- or out-targeting) as a dichotomous variable. About 179 participants received a broad appeal, while 58 received a targeted appeal. Table B2 reports the results. Targeted appeal treatments, relative to broad appeals, do not reach statistical significance. Therefore, receiving targeted appeals did not prime the centrality of politics to the non-partisans. In this model, political involvement seems to explain more of the centrality of political identity ($p < 0.001$). Those deeply involved in politics also report a high level of political-identity centrality.

Table B2: Regression Model on Identity Centrality

|	Identity centrality
Intercept	.312 (.066)
Targeted Appeals	**.023 (.054)**
Political involvement	.436 (.006) ***
N-Respondents	230
R2	.240
R2 Adj.	.202

*p '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05. This OLS model controls for age, gender, education, unionization, being born in Canada and political involvement.*

C. Party image distribution

There is a longstanding debate on whether voters can associate groups with each party. While some authors suggest that voters accurately understand these connections (Goggin, Henderson, & Theodoridis, 2020; Orr & Hurber, 2021), others suggest that partisans report biases when indicating group-party associations, either overrepresenting their party for preferred groups or underrepresenting preferred groups in the opposition (Ahler & Sood, 2018). Here I examine how voters associate groups with each party. In Canada, some associations are more feasible than others. For example, the Liberal Party is associated with new Canadians and ethnic minorities (Bilodeau & Kanji, 2010), and Christians are associated with the Conservative Party (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2016).

Figure C1: Distribution of Party Image in Canada
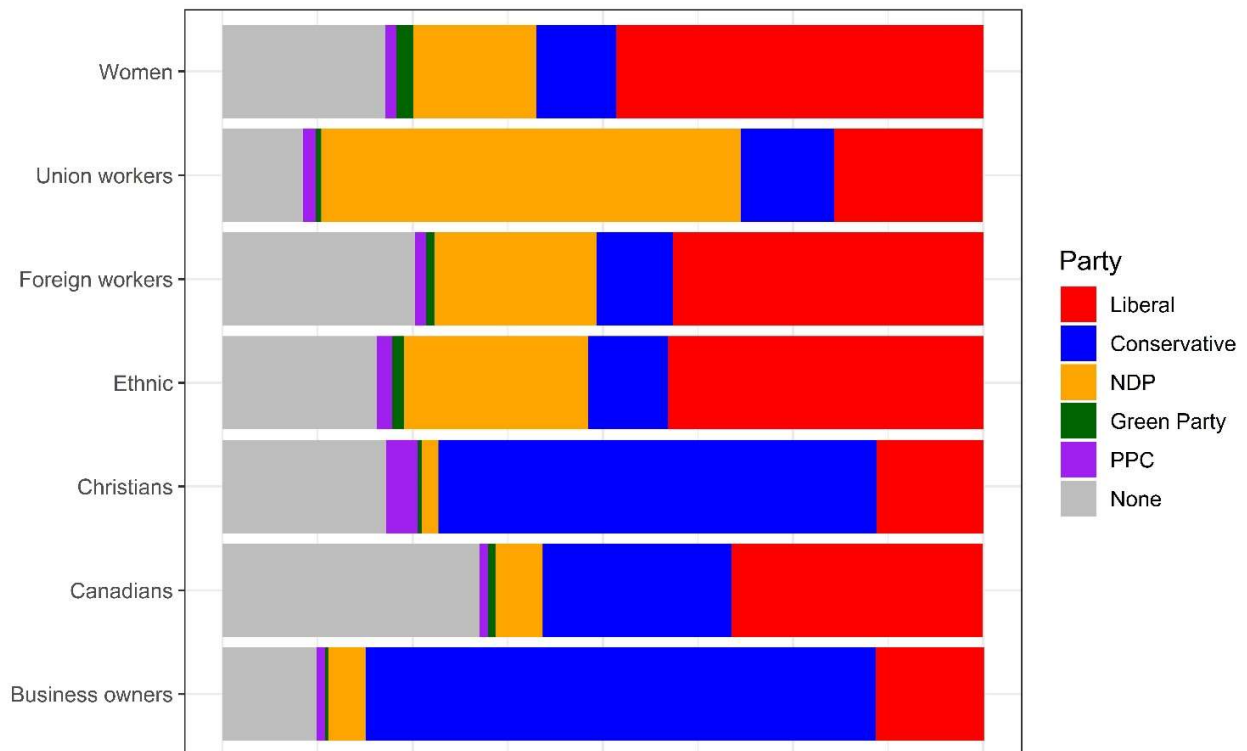
Notes: The results show the proportion of participants who indicated a prior association between a social group and one of the political parties. Only union workers, foreign workers, business owners, and Canadians were presented in targeted appeals. The other groups were asked to evaluate the overall perceptions of associations.

In Figure C1 above, I present the extended list of groups and the distribution of their associations with the party. Based on these distributions, Canadians can associate their parties with the groups queried. Beyond the economic cleavages used in experimental manipulations, the other presents the expected most frequent associations for each party. The Liberal Party is associated with women (48%)

and ethnic minorities (41%). Again, Christians have been associated with the Conservative Party (58%). Besides the union workers, the most frequent association with the NDP is with the ethnic minorities (24%). This suggests that this party approximates and competes with the Liberal Party for these cleavages (e.g., Cochrane, 2015).

D. Expressive and Instrumental Partisanship Scales

The current study proposes an interplay between instrumental and expressive partisanship. In traditional measures of partisanship, strength does not differentiate between these two types of attachments, despite scholars arguing that it often captures emotion-driven attachments (Clarke et al., 2019). Using a multi-item scale has multiple advantages; for instance, it provides stability in measurement (Ansolabehere et al., 2008).

Table D1 presents the items used to measure both types of partisanship. Each item of the expressive scale has four points, ranging from never (1) to always (4). In this study, I used the complete version of the expressive scale (Bankert et al., 2017). There remains a lack of theoretical and empirical tests for the measurement of instrumental partisanship using a multi-item scale. I selected four items that represent views on redistribution and combine them with ideological intensity. Future research should be dedicated to elaborating a measure that captures instrumental proximity to a party.

Table D1: Multi-item expressive and instrumental scales

Item	Question-wording	
	Expressive Partisanship	Instrumental Partisanship
#1	When people criticize this party, it feels like a personal insult.	The government should redistribute income from those who are better off.
#2	When I meet someone who supports this party, I feel connected with this person.	Big business takes advantage of ordinary people.
#3	When I speak about this party, I refer to them as "my party."	Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth.
#4	When people praise the party, it makes me feel good.	There is one law for the rich and one for the poor.
#5	When I speak about this party, I usually say "we" instead of "they".	Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance.
#6	I am interested in what other people think about this party.	Ideological intensity (0-100)
#7	I have a lot in common with other supporters of this party.	
#8	If this party does badly in opinion polls, my day is ruined.	
$\bar{x}$ (S.E.)	.558 (.005)	.563 (.004)
α	.86	.77

Notes: All items were combined to generate a scale that ranges from low (0) to high (1).

Another way to assess the performance of measurements is to compare their predictive power across outcomes. Figure D1 reports the predicted values across behavioural outcomes (i.e., affective polarization, motivated reasoning, and in-party voting between the expressive scale and traditional

measurement of partisanship strength. The expressive scale explains a broader range of values in all three cases than the traditional measurement.

Figure D1: Levels of Political Engagement by Measures of Partisan Strength
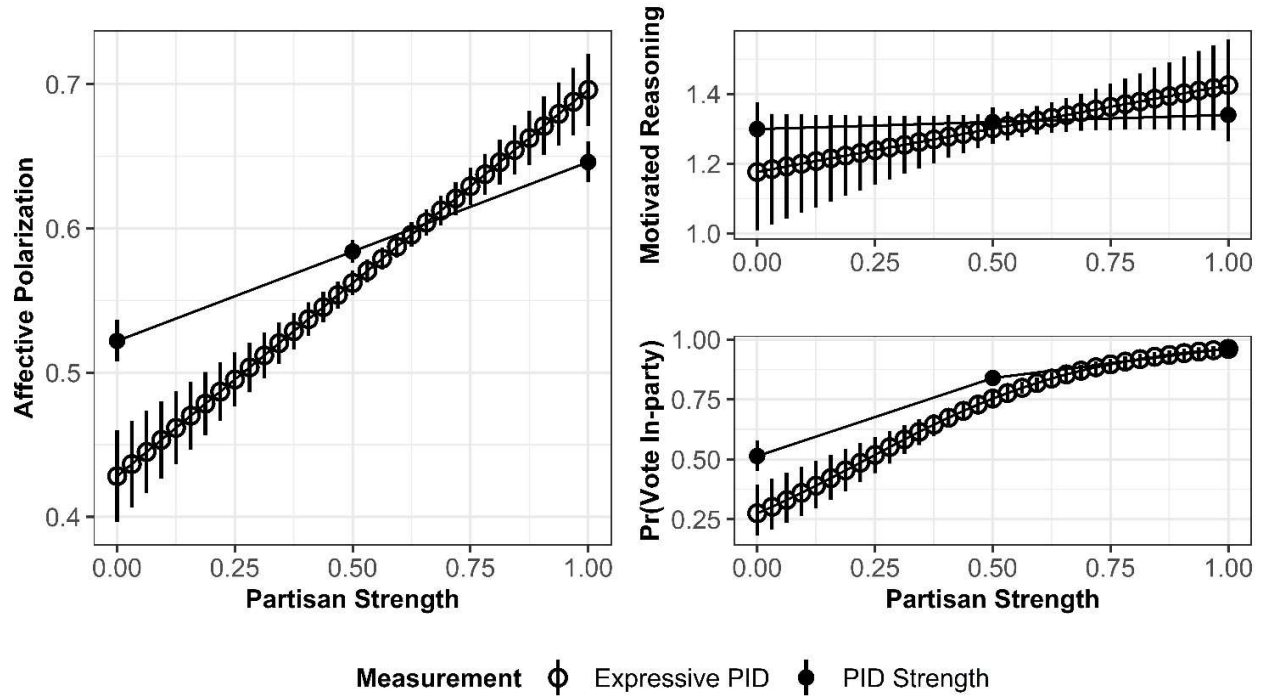
Note: These predicted engagements represent measurements of partisan strength measured in the survey, predicting affective polarization, motivated reasoning, and in-party voting. Traditional strength encompasses a 3-point scale and expressive PID is a multi-item identity scale (e.g., Huddy et al. 2015). All variables were standardized to vary between 0 and 1.

E. Sensitivity analysis for motivated reasoning and in-party voting

This article makes an empirical effort to identify causal mechanisms through expressive and instrumental attachments. Based on Zhou and Yamamoto (2023), the selected methodology enables identifying multi-mediators without assuming that these mediators are independent. This is fundamental for the TMP. For the first mediator (M_1), I select expressive attachment since this type of attachment is expected to have changed after group-based appeals. This mediator is supposed to impact instrumental attachments (M_2), as many studies suggest evaluations follow identity, but rarely the opposite (e.g., Lebo & Cassino, 2007; Dancey & Goren, 2010; cf. Highton & Kam, 2011).

Figure E1: Bias-adjusted Estimates of the PSE on Motivated Reasoning and In-Party Voting
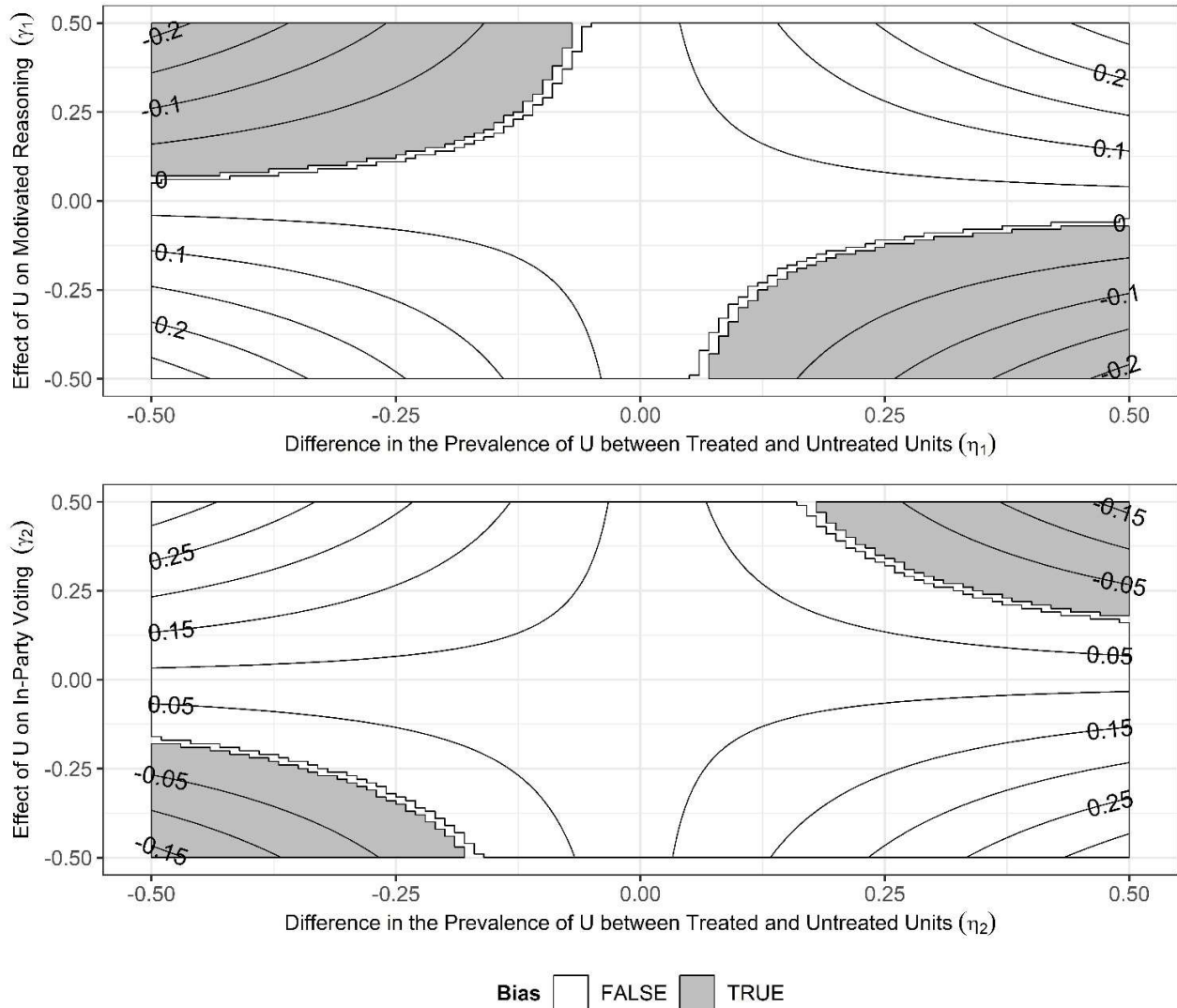
A sensitivity analysis assesses whether this path-specific estimation is sensitive to confounding factors. In the article, I show that the estimation for affective polarization is somewhat susceptible. However, I introduced two covariates (i.e., political involvement and group affect) to show how sensitive the PSE for polarization needs to be to overturn the substantive conclusions. In sum, I found that the unobserved confounder has to be more extreme, which suggests that it would be rare. The sensitivity analysis for the specific outcome suggests robustness to confoundedness.

Here, I complete the sensitivity analyses for the two remaining outcomes: motivated reasoning and in-party voting. Figure E1 displays Bias-adjusted Estimates of the PSE of each outcome. For motivated reasoning, I examine the sensitivity of the targeting effect through attachments. For in-party voting, I investigate the sensitivity of the confoundedness of the direct effect. In both cases, I allow the parameters to vary from -0.5 to 0.5 with a step size of 0.01. The boundaries between the areas with different colours suggest combining unobserved confounders with the outcome and manipulation that would reverse the sign of the estimated effect of in-targeting on motivated reasoning through attachments and the estimated effect of in-targeting on in-party voting. As shown below, the combination does not have to be extreme to change the conclusions in the top panel (motivated reasoning) relative to the bottom panel (in-party voting). This suggests a stronger sensitivity to confoundedness of the estimated indirect effect on reasoning compared to the estimated direct effect on voting.

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