

Dog-Whistle Politics, Coded Communication and Religious Appeals

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In the 2002 State of the Union, George Bush declared that “there’s power, wonder-working power, in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people” in support of his faith-based initiative and the Citizen Service Act. The way this language was interpreted varied. For some, the phrase “wonder-working power” had no special meaning, but those who had been exposed to a popular evangelical hymn recognized the line as a refrain in “There is Power in the Blood.” Candidates and politicians frequently invoke religious language, and Bush’s use of a religious reference is not exceptional. However, though religious language is assumed to be persuasive, little scholarly attention has been directed at understanding the effect of religious appeals on political attitudes. Bush’s wonder-working power reference highlights a second question: how does coded language, or language that has a special meaning for a subset of the population, affect political attitudes? This chapter examines the effects of both religious language, and coded communication in candidate appeals.

Recently, President Bush’s use of religious code words has been the subject of some media attention. As Bruce Lincoln writes in the *Boston Globe*, “aware that he must appeal to the center to secure reelection, he employs double-coded signals that veil much of his religious message from outsiders” (September 12, 2004). However, coded communication, or “dog-whistle politics,” as it has been recently labeled, is not specific to Bush’s rhetoric; Bill Clinton’s used the phrase “send me” to structure his endorsement for John Kerry at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. The phrase references a passage in the Bible (*Isaiah* 6:8). Ronald Reagan used language in his 1984 State of the Union address that closely paralleled another biblical passage: “Let us be sure that those who come after will say of us in our time, that in our time we did everything that could be done. We finished the race; we kept them free; we kept the faith.”¹ Both are examples of language that is understood as religious by a subset of the population. Coded communication such as this might be

¹ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 2 *Timothy* 4:7

particularly effective because it targets those predisposed to respond favorably to the message, and goes over the heads of those who might be turned off by it.

This chapter will begin by exploring the role of coded communication in politics and distinguishing two modes of coding: by deniability and by specificity. I make a case for the effectiveness of coded appeals, relying on research on targeted marketing and group dynamics. I test my hypotheses experimentally and discuss the implications of these studies for coded appeals in politics.

Coded Communication in Political Appeals

Coded communication is not a recent phenomenon in politics, nor is it confined to religion. Perhaps the most frequently employed example of coded communication in politics is coded racism. The prevailing norm of racial equality means that overtly racist appeals are sure to delegitimize a candidate for most Americans. Staying within the bounds of acceptable political discourse, some politicians and candidates direct their racist appeals in coded terms (Mendelberg, 2001).

Currently, journalists and academics “decode” Bush’s speeches for secret religious messages, often implying that the language is strategically placed. In fact, the trend has prompted some in the Christian community to mock the decoders. Ted Olson, the managing editor of *Christianity Today* writes, “sadly, we’ll no longer be able to secretly nod and wink to each other as Bush talks of ‘hills to climb’ and declares his beliefs using the phrase ‘I believe.’ But don’t worry, fellow conspirators, Lincoln has missed most of the code words in Bush’s acceptance speech” (2004). Is coded communication strategic or simply the result of the way that different backgrounds and cultures affect language? Was Bush’s mention of “yesterday, today and tomorrow” in the 2005 State of the Union address a carefully crafted wink to evangelicals or just the way that he speaks? The intent of the speaker, or more likely speechwriter, is interesting and would shed light on how politicians view

the role of religion in political speech. However, my definition of coded communication does not hinge on the speaker's intent. I define coded communication by the listener, rather than by the speaker's intent, because of this project's focus on the effects of religious discourse in the mass public.

In this project, coded communication is defined as language that has a special meaning for a subset of the population. This sort of communication has recently acquired the label, "dog-whistle politics," drawing upon the way that dog-whistles are perceptible to dogs but not to humans due to their high frequency.² Appeals in politics might also have a meaning that is only "heard" by some; references to hymns, prayers, and biblical passages will resonate with those who share a religious tradition, but this religious meaning will be imperceptible to those who do not. A coded communication becomes obvious by making the religious content explicit to all. The coded communication, "wonder-working power" would have been an obvious religious appeal if President Bush had included language such as, "As I sing in church, there is power..." In Bill Clinton's 1992 Democratic Convention speech, he quotes scripture explicitly twice. One example is "as the Scripture says, 'our eyes have not yet seen, nor our ears heard, nor minds imagined' what we can build." This message might have been coded simply by omitting the language "as the Scripture says."

Mendelberg (2001) demonstrates the effectiveness of code words and implicit appeals in political communication. However, these code words are different from the coding examined in this chapter. Mendelberg defines code words as "a deniable verbal reference to race" (21). More recent work also follows this understanding. Hurwitz and Peffley (2005) define code words as "words that are fundamentally nonracial in nature that have, through the process of association, assumed a

² The term became popular during the 2005 election in the UK, where the exemplar of dog-whistle politics was the Conservative slogan, "Are you thinking what we're thinking?" The slogan was said to appeal to those who opposed Labour's stance on immigration without appearing racist. The term has its roots in Australia, where it was associated with a political strategist, Lynton Crosby, who consulted for the Conservatives in 2005.

strong racial component” (101). They demonstrate that racial code words can still be effective in a post-Willie Horton era and find that the simple addition of the words “inner city” to a policy proposal cause respondents to rely on their racial attitudes in evaluating the policy. Again, the racial component to “inner city” is deniable.

Substituting religion for race does not bring my definition in line with Mendelberg’s. The religious code words in this research are not coded because they are deniable. Instead, they are coded because they have a special meaning for a subset of the population. If their more specific meaning is made available to the general population, that meaning might not be deniable. This distinction is clear in the ways that the authors of the Willie Horton ad and President Bush’s speeches dealt with criticism. Michael Gerson, President Bush’s speechwriter, responded to criticism by saying: “They’re not code words; they’re our culture,” he said. “It’s not a code word when I put a reference to T.S. Eliot’s ‘Four Quartets’ in our Whitehall speech [in London on Nov. 19, 2003]; it’s a literary reference. Just because some people don’t get it doesn’t mean it’s a plot or a secret” (Cooperman, 2004, pg. 6). On the other hand, those associated with the Willie Horton advertisement denied any racial component to the advertisements. Lee Atwater defended the ad, “There was nothing racial about Willie Horton. We resent the fact that it was used racially in the campaign because we certainly didn’t... and we were very conscious about it... We are very sorry if anyone took it racially, because we had a concerted effort in our campaign to make sure that race was not used in any way, shape, or form” (Mendelberg, 139). Gerson accepts the religious component to the language, while Atwater denies any racial intent. In these examples, the religious appeal was coded by its specificity while the racial appeals were vague, and coded by their deniability.

The distinction I draw between coding by deniability and specificity does not mean that these categories are mutually exclusive. For example, some noted that George Bush’s reference to Dred Scott in the second presidential debates was a way to reference abortion. According to this

interpretation, by using the Dred Scott decision as an example of what he does not want in a justice, he was signaling that he would not nominate a justice who agreed with *Roe v. Wade* (Kirkpatrick, 2004). The two cases have been linked for some in the Christian, pro-life community based on their association between slavery and abortion. They argue that abortion and slavery are both instances where the strong, or politically powerful, have a responsibility to protect the weak, and that an overly activist Supreme Court erred in both *Dred Scot* and *Roe v. Wade* by not recognizing the humanity in slaves and the unborn (Buckley, 2000). Of course, in this case Bush could deny that the *Dred Scott* remark referenced *Roe v. Wade*. The appeal was also coded by its specificity; the appeal only signaled abortion to a subset of the population, and given the controversial nature of an anti- *Roe v. Wade* signal, the specificity of the cue was essential.

Why do politicians sometimes use references coded by deniability, and sometimes use references coded by specificity? Mendelberg argues that racial appeals have become coded because of our norm of equality (17). An explicit racial appeal violates the norm, and therefore deniability is crucial. In the United States, we do not have a norm against the use of religious language in politics. In fact, survey research indicates quite the opposite. However, this does not mean that all religious language is persuasive. Religious appeals might not violate a norm but also might not be generally persuasive. The targeted nature of language coded by its specificity means that it evades those who might be turned off by the language, rather than evading a norm that is almost universally held. This type of coded language has a similar effect to narrowcasting, which allows people to selectively expose themselves only to certain types of media, often those most consistent with their existing attitudes (Ranney 1990, Sunstein 2001). Coded language is able to achieve the effect of narrowcasting, without relying on the audience to selectively expose themselves to certain messages.

These two types of coded communication have important similarities. Mendelberg refers to code words as a “way for Republicans to wink at the white audience without getting caught” (136).

Code words in this project are also a wink, either intentional or unintentional, but while in Mendelberg's work, these winks can be denied, in the current project, sizable segments of the electorate do not notice the wink.

Evading the Out-group

Advertisers routinely try to tailor messages for specific groups. For example, there were two versions of a Stove Top Stuffing advertisement. One featured a white family, consisting of parents and two kids, and referred to the product as "stuffing". The other featured an African American family, which also included a grandfather, and referred to the product as "dressing" (Brumbaugh, 2002). Brumbaugh argues that targeted advertisements that include "both similar subculture sources and other subculture relevant cues... induce members of subcultures to draw on this knowledge to allow them to create meaning that others outside this subculture cannot" (259). Marketing scholars note that targeted marketing such as this can create non-target effects. The non-target audience may simply fail to be persuaded by the advertisement, or, might develop negative attitudes towards the advertisement. The African American targeted Stove Top advertisement did not air on NBC, but if it did, according to this line of research, the non-African American audience might develop more negative attitudes toward the product. Aaker, et. al. (2000) note that non-target group members have felt ignored, neglected, and alienated by targeted advertising (128). In marketing, non-target effects occur when the non-target group is the majority group but not when the non-target group is in the minority. Minority group members are accustomed to being the non-target group, and typically do not develop negative feelings towards advertisements directed at other audiences.

The targeted nature of marketing is generally available to all, at least at some level. Brumbaugh is correct to point out that outsiders are not equipped to create the same meanings from the advertisement as the targeted group, however the non-target audience is usually aware that the

advertisement is targeted to another group. However, there are some examples of attempts of targeted marketing that is undetected by the non-target audience. One example was a Subaru ad, in which the cars' license plates read "XENA LVR" and "P TOWN." The references were meant to communicate to gay and lesbian that the ads are meant for them without alienating others (Kanner 2000). This advertising campaign, which also included the slogan "It's not a choice. It's the way we're built" was intended to operate as coded communication; one of the campaign's developers explains, "it's apparent to gay people that that we're talking about being gay, but straight people don't know what's going on" (Poux, quoted in Palmer, 2000).

Advertisers could reserve their targeted appeals for certain media outlets; for example, the Stove Top Stuffing ad that targeted an African American audience aired on BET. Similarly, politicians could only make their targeted appeals in front of the appropriate group. The Subaru ad and dog-whistle politics suggest that targeted messages can also evade the out-group if their specific meaning is generally unavailable. In politics, this method of reaching the target audience might be particularly attractive. Politicians can attempt to narrowcast, but the very proliferation of media outlets that makes narrowcasting possible also creates more possibilities for other sources in the media to pick up on the narrowcasted message and bring it to a wider audience.

Similarity Cues: Similarly Persuasive?

*Metaphors work better when they are fresh, not when they are loud.
Joe Carter, The Evangelical Outpost, December 1, 2005*

One way that coded communication might be more persuasive in the aggregate is that the group-relevant interpretation of the language evades the out-group. Coded messages also might be more persuasive than obvious cues to the in-group. Numerous studies in social psychology demonstrate the effectiveness of similarity in persuasion (Brock 1965, Berscheid 1966). However,

little attention has been paid to variation. In other words, similarity cues might be generally persuasive, but do they all persuade equally?

First, there are conditions under which source similarity is not conducive to persuasion. For example, patients are unlikely to find their doctor persuasive if she seems just like them in terms of medical knowledge; expertise is a much more important source characteristic in this instance. If one's goal is to determine an objective fact, then agreement among dissimilar others will be more convincing than a group of like-minded others. For political candidates, however, similarity is an important source characteristic. McCaul et. al. (1995) find that subjects prefer a political candidate with similar issue positions to one with consistent issue positions, though politicians and the subjects themselves believe that others will find that consistency is more important. Similarity in gender, age, and race appear to increase willingness to vote for a candidate (Sigelman and Sigelman, 1982). Group influence in politics can be so strong that, in the presence of partisan cues, subjects support welfare policies that are contrary to their own ideological inclinations (Cohen 2003). Though similarity in religious beliefs has not yet been experimentally tested, I expect that like age, race, and gender, people prefer political candidates who hold similar religious beliefs.

Although the effectiveness of similarity is accepted, the mechanisms of persuasion via similarity are not well specified (Petty and Wegener 2004). Previous studies indicate that fairly subtle aspects of similarity can enhance persuasion. For example, Aune and Kikuchi (1993) find that similarity in language intensity (for example, good vs. excellent) was related to greater agreement with the speaker. Subtle similarity cues work, but would stronger cues produce stronger effects? There is no basis in the literature for assuming that there is a linear relationship between the strength of the similarity cue and its power to persuade. Perhaps subtle similarity cues are more persuasive than similarity that needs to be explicitly called upon.

One difference between obvious similarity cues and coded similarity cues is the size of the in-group. The coded nature of these appeals means that their specific meaning is only understood by some, while the obvious cues are available to all, including people who identify with the group but did not catch the reference. Because coded cues are more difficult to send, and more difficult to receive, they might signal a closer connection between the speaker and the listener. In the realm of religious rhetoric, exclusive language might convey a tighter in-group, having the effect of moving down a level of categorization (from Christian to Evangelical, or from Religious to Highly Religious). Since the in-group for the coded messages is more exclusive, distinctiveness theory would predict that these cues would be more successful. Research on targeted marketing indicates that it is most effective when the targeted group is distinctive, either in social status, particularly for those who perceive a status deficit, or number (Grier and Deshpande, 2001). Grier and Deshpande find that both types of distinctiveness heighten the salience of group identity, in this case ethnic group, and this moderates the effect of an ethnically matched spokesperson on brand attitudes.

Optimal distinctiveness theory recognizes that groups serve two needs: the need to belong and the need to be different (Brewer 1991). Intra-group relations fulfill our similarity needs, while inter-group differences fulfill our need to be different. Coded references, like inside jokes, are a strong signal that the speaker is one of us, and others are not. The explicit appeal might also contain some culturally specific information, but like the inside joke that has to be explained, I hypothesize that the explicit component will cheapen the more authentic connection formed via coded communication.

Hypotheses

Given that there is religious diversity in the United States, the unique appeal of coded language is that it allows politicians to speak directly to like-minded others, communicating to them

common ground and shared values, while those who do not share this perspective remain oblivious. I hypothesize that coded religious appeals will be more persuasive than either obvious religious appeals or appeals with no religious language. The religious content in coded religious appeals will go over the heads of some of the population and I expect that in most cases, those who do not understand the religious content of the appeal are those who would be turned off by religious language in politics.

I also hypothesize that coded language will be particularly persuasive amongst those who recognize the religious content in coded religious language. Those who understand the reference are likely to be those who were predisposed to respond favorably to the appeal, and I hypothesize that there is an added appeal based on the exclusivity of the language.

Method

Two studies were designed to test these hypotheses: one was directed at the out-group, and the other targeted the in-group. Both studies were conducted over the Internet. Subjects were asked to watch a brief video and were told that the video was prepared on behalf of a candidate for an upcoming party convention. Subjects were randomly assigned to view one of three videos. The video was 40 seconds long, and included an excerpt from a speech attributed to the fictional candidate. One sentence in the speech was manipulated to include either coded religious language, obvious religious language, or no religious language.

Coded Religious Language Condition:

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

support and, when appropriate, they deserve the assistance of the federal government.

One of my goals is to apply the compassion of America to the deepest problems of America. For so many in our country the need is great. I believe there is power -- wonder-working power -- in the goodness and idealism of the American people.³

Obvious Religious Language Condition:

As I sing in church, there is power -- wonder-working power -- in the goodness and idealism of the American people.

No Religious Language Condition:

I believe there is power in the goodness and idealism of the American people.

After viewing the video, subjects were asked a series of questions designed to assess their attitudes towards the candidate and the video. Subjects were asked how positive their initial impression of the candidate was, how likely they would be to look at campaign materials they received from the candidate in the mail, and how likely they would be to vote for the candidate.⁴ Each was measured on 5-point scales.

Emotions

Subjects were asked if the candidate, Mike Reynolds, made them feel the following emotions, all measured on a 5 point scale: Interested, Upset, Inspired, Nervous, Proud.

Traits:

Subjects were then asked how well each of these traits described Mike Reynolds: Likable, Moral, Knowledgeable, Dishonest, and Strong Leader.

³ The coded condition is taken from George Bush's 2003 State of the Union Address. In the original, Bush also uses the word "faith" to describe the American people. I removed this word from each condition so that the control condition would not have any religious content.

⁴ Pretesting indicated that many subjects were unwilling to comment on their likelihood of voting for the candidate, based on such little information. Likelihood of looking at mail was included as a lower stakes indicator of political viability.

Felt Similarity and Felt Targetedness:

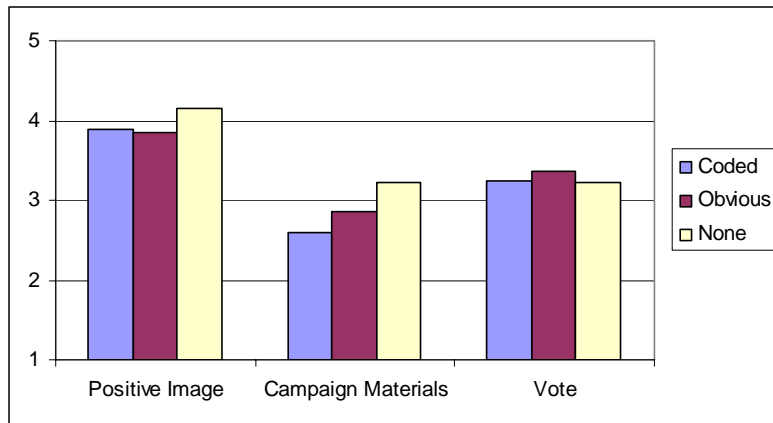
Feelings of similarity with the candidate were assessed by agreement with the following indicators: “Mike Reynolds is similar to me,” “Mike Reynolds shares my values,” “Mike Reynolds thinks like me.” Two agree/disagree items assessed the feeling that the campaign created the video with the respondent in mind: “I felt the campaign video was created for people like me,” and “I don’t believe I was in the target audience the campaign created this video for” (Reverse coded).

Study 1: Candidate Evaluation Study, Princeton University

400 Princeton students were randomly selected to receive an invitation to participate in a survey via e-mail and were offered \$5 compensation. This yielded 129 Princeton undergraduates, and of these 58% were Democrats and 28% were Republicans. The survey had a question designed to distinguish in-group members: the last question asked subjects if they had heard the phrase “wonder-working power” before. Only 11 students reported that they had heard the phrase before, which did not allow for any in-group analysis.

Because my hypotheses are based in group attachments, I group the respondents by current religious affiliation. Thirty-seven percent of the sample was Protestant, and 19% was Catholic. I grouped these categories for the analysis, and grouped students responding that they were Jewish, not religious, or of a different religious faith separately. The manipulation had no significant effect amongst the Christian respondents, except the unexpected finding that they are more inclined to look at campaign materials from the mail when the candidate does not use religious language (compared to the coded condition, $p < .05$).

Table 1: Christian Respondents

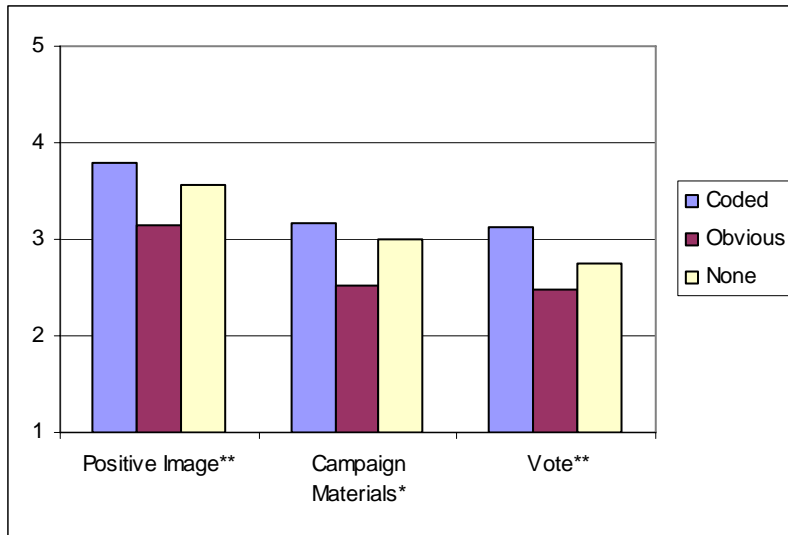


n = 65

In general, they are not any more or less impressed by the candidate when he uses religious language. This could indicate that the manipulation was too subtle. It could also indicate that the religious appeal used in this experiment simply was not persuasive: amongst this group of Christians, the use of religious language did not cause respondents to think any more, or less of the candidate. Another explanation for the non-finding is the peculiar nature of Christians in the university environment; amongst Christians in the 2004 General Social Survey, 34% hold the belief that the Bible is the literal word of god. Amongst this group of Christians, only 12% hold this belief. These Christians complicate the analysis, because they do not fit neatly into an in-group/out-group dichotomy.

Results from the non-Christian subjects tell a different story. Subject in the obvious religious language condition hold a more negative impression of the candidate, are less likely to look at campaign materials, and are less likely to vote for the candidate when compared to both the coded religious language condition and the no religious language condition. (Table 2).

Table 2: Non-Christian Respondents

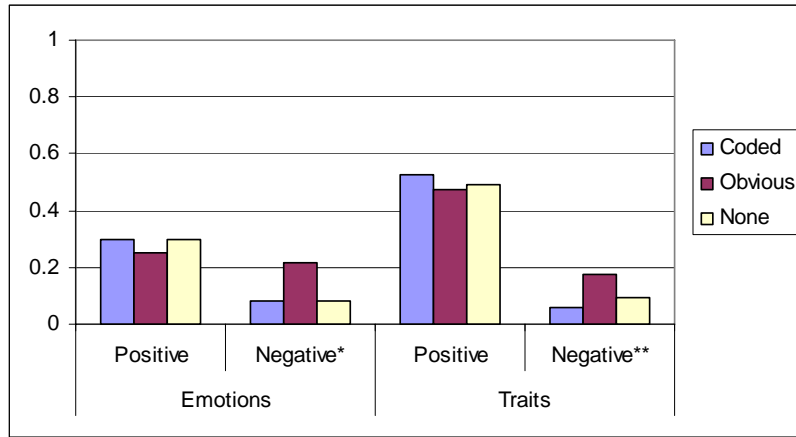


** indicates $p < .05$ referring to the difference in means between the coded and obvious conditions, based on a one-tailed test. Differences between the obvious and coded conditions are significant ($p < .10$) for Positive and Mail. $n = 60$

This pattern has two important implications: first, it appears that religious appeals can turn off those who are not similarly religious. Second, the coded condition appears to have gone over the heads of these respondents. These respondents are not impressed by the candidate when he makes an obvious religious reference: the similarity between their responses to the coded reference and the reference without any religious content indicates that they did not catch the reference.

Emotions and Traits: In order to further investigate the hypothesis that these out-group members were turned off when the candidate referenced his religion, I examine differences in means on emotions: positive (interested, inspired, proud), and negative (nervous, upset). I also examine differences on traits: positive (Likable, Moral, Knowledgeable, Strong Leader), and negative (Dishonest). I hypothesize that out-group members will express heightened negative evaluations in the obvious religious language condition but that differences in positive evaluations will be slight. The difference in attitudes towards the candidate is not due to liking him more in the coded or no religious language conditions; I expect that the difference is due to the fact that they dislike him less.

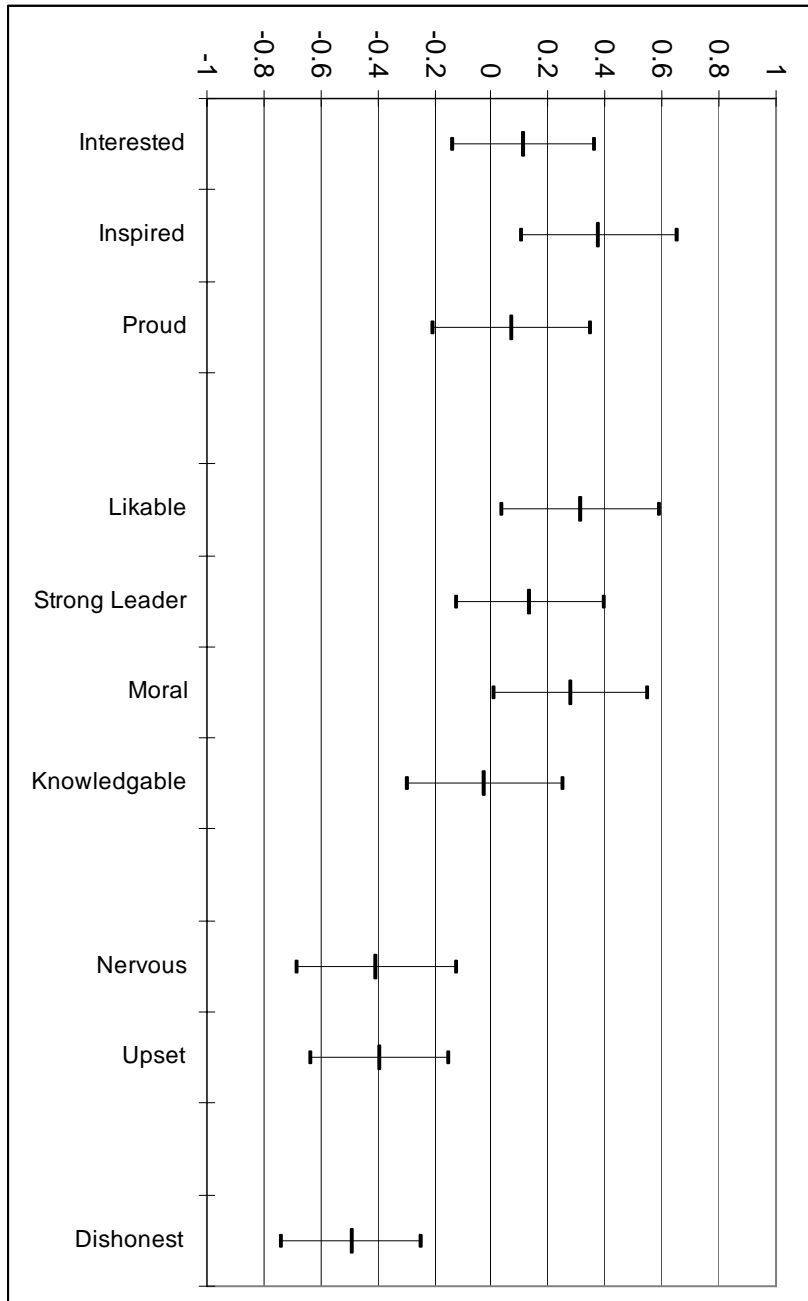
Table 3: Non-Christian Respondents, Traits & Emotions



* indicates $p < .10$, ** indicates $p < .05$ referring to the difference between the coded and obvious conditions, based on a one-tailed test. Alphas: Positive Emotions (.86), Negative Emotions (.88), Positive Traits (.82).
 n = 60

Table 3 suggests that the obvious religious language triggered negative emotions and traits but had no effect on positive evaluations. In order to further investigate this hypothesis, I calculated confidence intervals, based on .05 level of significance, around the difference in means between the coded and obvious conditions for each emotion and trait assessment. Table 4 demonstrates that respondents in the obvious condition compared to the coded condition felt more nervous, more upset, and were more likely to say he is dishonest. Differences between these conditions for positive evaluations are not as clear: coded condition respondents do feel that the candidate is more likable and moral, though both of these differences are slight. They do not feel that he is more knowledgeable, or a strong leader, when compared to the obvious religious language condition. The results on emotions are mixed as well; respondents in the coded condition feel more inspired by the candidate but are indistinguishable from their obvious religious language counterparts in terms of being interested or proud.

Table 4: Emotion and Trait Assessment Difference in Means



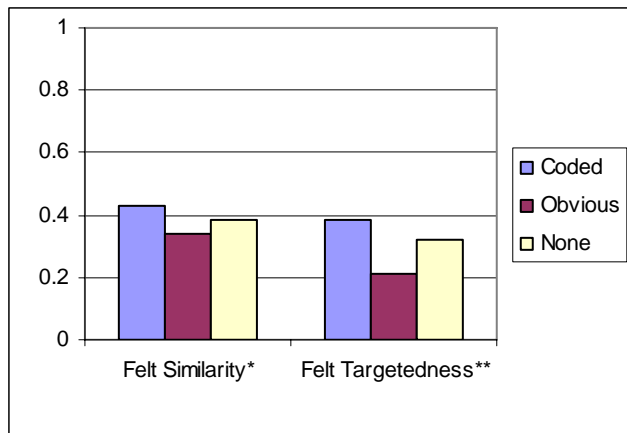
Differences are computed as Coded – Obvious, and confidence intervals were calculated based on .05 level of significance. Each dependent variable was measured on a five-point scale.

n = 44

Felt Similarity and Felt Targetedness: Research on advertising effects suggests that felt similarity and felt targetedness moderate the effect of targeted marketing. Their findings, that similarity moderates

the effects for minority group members and targetedness moderates the effect for majority group members (Grier and Brumbaugh, 1999) have unclear implications for the groups examined here. As previously discussed, whether a group qualifies as majority and minority might hinge on many factors, such as numbers or perceptions of power. I examine the degree to which non Christians felt targeted by the campaign video and felt similar to the candidate.

Table 5: Felt Similarity & Targetedness, Non-Christians



Question Wording: All Agree or Disagree, 7 point scales.
 Felt targetedness: Alpha =.74. Felt similarity: Alpha=.89
 n = 60

Non-Christians responded that they felt less targeted by the materials, and less similar to the candidate when the candidate uses an obvious religious reference. Again, the differences between the coded and no religious language condition are not statistically significant.

Implications

The Princeton Candidate Evaluation Study provided support for the out-group hypotheses: Respondents who were not Christian showed less preference for the candidate when he used obviously religious language. Appeals without religious language and with coded religious language are similarly effective, demonstrating that the religious content of the coded appeals was not available to respondents who were not Christian. There is strong support that the differences in attitudes were driven by negative emotions and trait assessments in the obvious religious language

condition, and mixed results on positive emotions and traits. Some caution is warranted in interpreting these findings beyond a student population; it is possible that adults in the general population are not as turned off by religious appeals. This study also suggests that matching the coded appeal to the appropriate group is difficult: only 15% of the Princeton sample was familiar with the phrase “wonder-working power”. Targeted sampling will be necessary in order to study in-group effects.

Study 2: Knowledge Networks Study

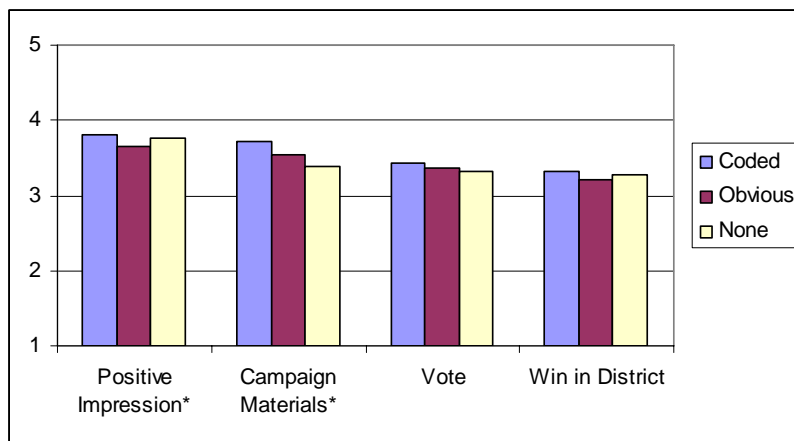
The second study was designed with several sampling goals in mind: subjects were drawn from a national sample⁵ rather than a student population, and were chosen based on their religious affiliation. Knowledge Networks created a sample of 402 Pentecostals, based on a previous survey. Pentecostals are an interesting group for this study for several reasons; first, preliminary research suggested that they were very likely to be familiar with the hymn, ‘There is Power in the Blood.’⁶ Their rising numbers also make them an interesting group politically: Pentecostalism is the fastest growing religion in the world, and in a recent Gallup survey, Pentecostals were most likely to believe that religion is relevant today (2002). Church of God in Christ and Assemblies of God, two large Pentecostal denominations have each more than quadrupled their membership since 1970, and have a combined membership of more than 8 million (Briggs 2006). Finally, Pentecostal’s growing popularity amongst formerly Catholic Latinos might have political ramifications; Catholic Latinos tend to vote for Democrats, while Pentecostal Latinos tend to vote Republican (Geis 2006).

⁵ The sample omitted subjects in Louisiana, because the images of the mock candidate “Mike Reynolds” were taken from a former Congressman and failed senate candidate from Louisiana.

⁶ Ten regionally and racially diverse Pentecostal churches were called, under the pretense of a school project tracing the use of hymns. The person who answered the phone was asked about their familiarity with three hymns: Of the 5 who provided answers, all were familiar with “There is Power in the Blood” and familiarity with the other two hymns varied, suggesting that familiarity was genuine, rather than driven by agreement effects.

Of the 402 Pentecostals who were given this survey, 41 were dropped because they were the second person in their household to take the survey, and 2 were dropped because they indicated in open-ended questions that they could not hear the video. This yielded 359 respondents, and of these, 84% indicated that they had heard the phrase “wonder-working power” before. I analyze in-group effects amongst Pentecostals.⁷

Table 6: Pentecostals

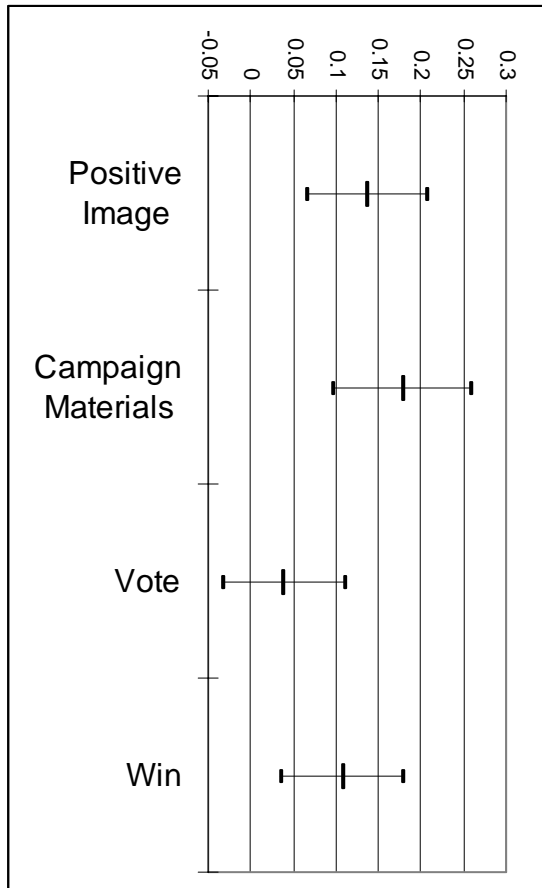


* indicates $p < .10$, referring to the difference in means between the obvious and coded conditions, using a one-tailed test. The difference between the coded and no religious language conditions are significant at $p < .05$ (Campaign Materials) using a one-tailed test. $n = 359$

Amongst Pentecostals, coded communication had small, but consistent effects. On each dependent variable, the coded reference was more persuasive than the appeal without religious content. On positive initial impression, and willingness to look at campaign materials, the difference between obvious and coded condition is significant. A closer look at the difference in means between the coded and obvious conditions reveals that for three of the four measures, respondents in the coded religious language condition responded more favorably toward the candidate when compared to the obvious religious language condition.

⁷ In addition to the original dependent variables, subjects in this study were asked, “If he were to run in your district, how likely is it that he would win?”

Table 7: Differences in Means, Total Pentecostal Sample

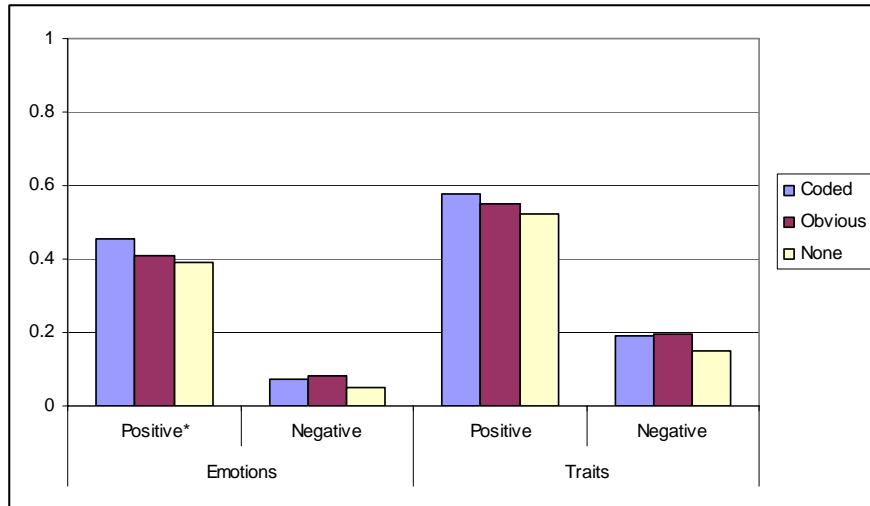


Differences are computed as Coded – Obvious, and confidence intervals were calculated based on .05 level of significance. Each dependent variable was measured on a five-point scale. n = 233

For in-group effects, I expect that there will be significant differences between respondents in the obvious and coded conditions on positive emotions and trait assessments, but that there will not be much difference between these two groups on negative emotions and trait assessments. I expect that differences for these subjects will be based on liking the candidate in the coded condition more, rather than disliking him less.⁸

⁸ For this study, two changes were made to trait assessment measures: I substituted “insincere” for “dishonest” and also included “inexperienced” as a trait measure. Both changes were made in an attempt to tap variation in negative assessments of the candidate. Subjects in previous studies were reluctant to label the candidate “dishonest” based on such little information.

Table 8: Emotions & Traits, Pentecostal Sample

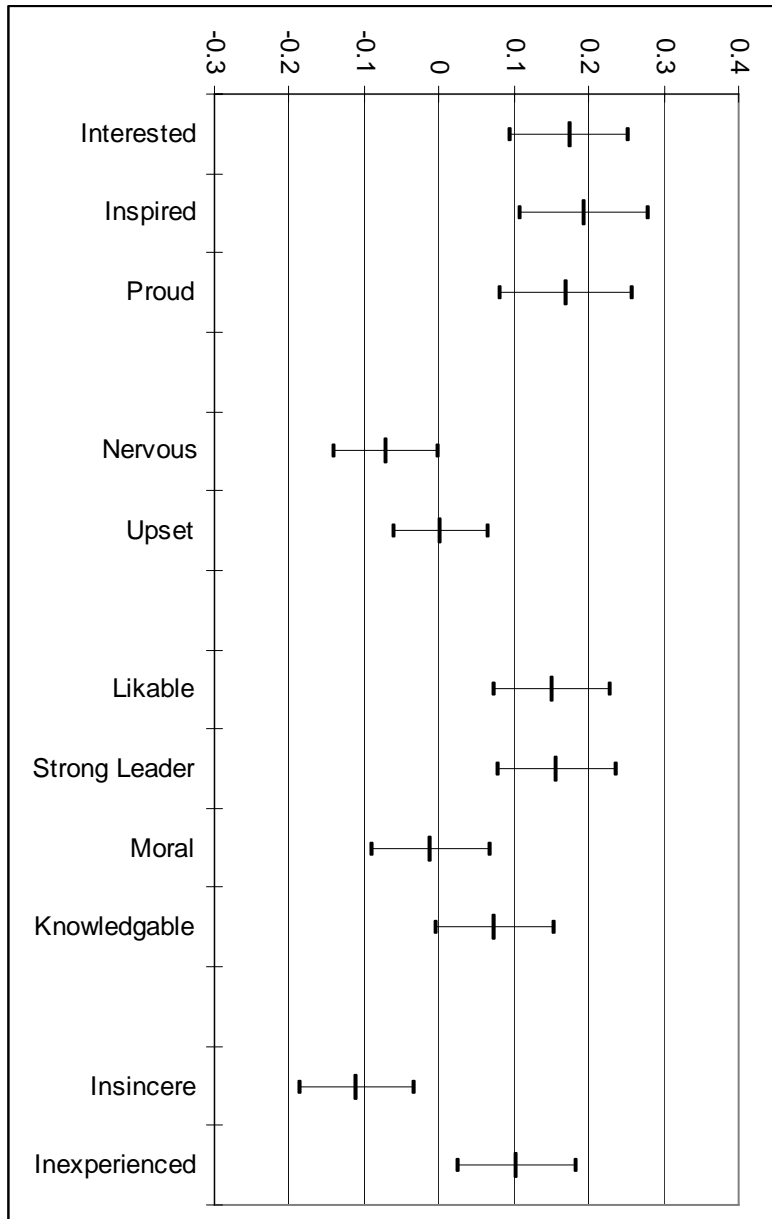


* indicates $p < .10$, referring to the difference in means between the obvious and coded conditions, using a one-tailed test. Alphas: Positive Emotions (.90), Negative Emotions (.75), Positive Traits (.93), Negative Traits (.65).
n = 359

Table 6 suggests weak support for this hypothesis. Though there are small differences between the coded and obvious conditions for positive emotions and traits, the difference is only significant for positive emotions. There are no significant differences in negative emotions or negative traits.

Table 9 shows the difference in means between the coded and obvious conditions for each component of the emotions and traits scales separately. The difference for each of the positive emotions is clearly above zero. The differences for the positive trait evaluations tell a more mixed story; subjects in the coded condition felt the candidate was more likable and stronger leader, but there are no clear differences on perceptions that he is moral or knowledgeable.

Table 9: Differences in Means, Pentecostal Sample



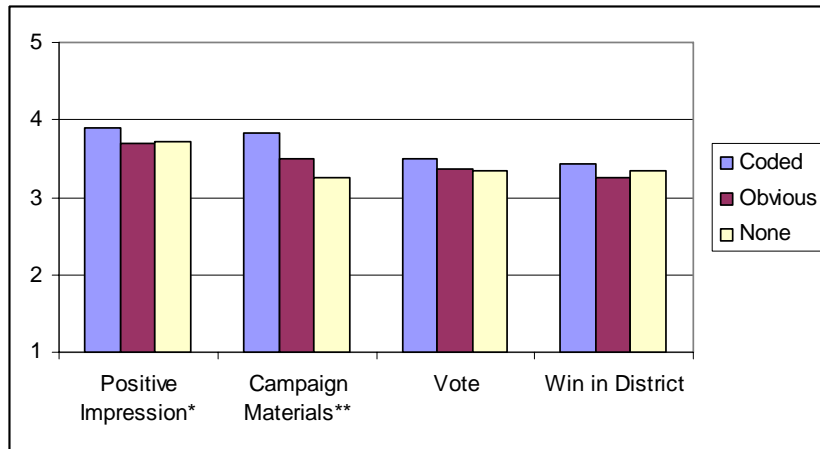
Differences are computed as Coded – Obvious, and confidence intervals were calculated based on .05 level of significance. Each dependent variable was measured on a five-point scale. n = 233

Inside the In-group:

These results are suggestive, but it is possible that there is diversity amongst Pentecostals that is relevant to the effectiveness of these appeals. First, I examine effects amongst those who were raised Pentecostal. Pentecostalism has experienced tremendous growth, and I expect that

coded language will not be as effective with newcomers; they may not yet be familiar with the hymn, and I expect that it does not signal authenticity to them as it does to those who have longer histories in the church. Sixty-four percent of the sample was raised Pentecostal, yielding 224 respondents.

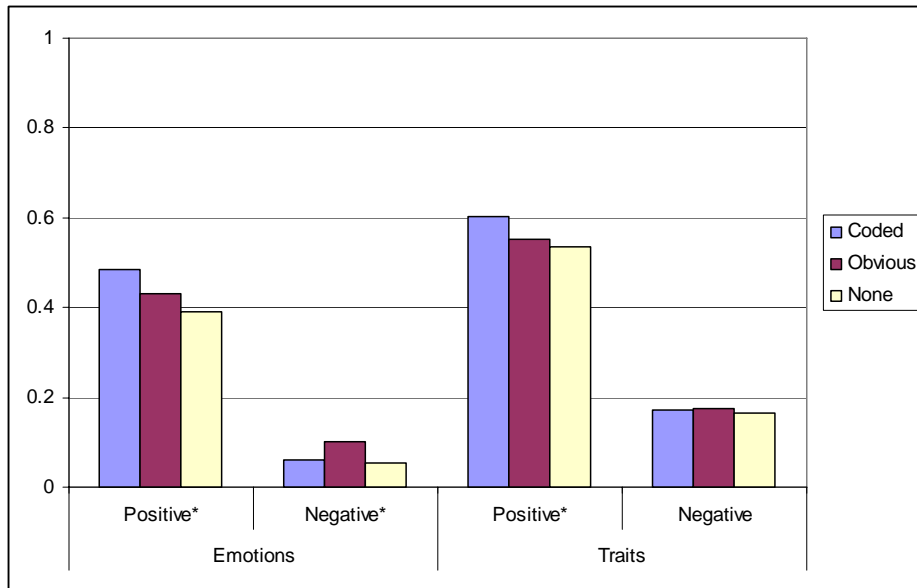
Table 10: Raised Pentecostal



* indicates $p < .10$, ** indicates $p < .05$ based on a one-tailed test. Differences between the coded and no religious language condition were significant $p < .10$ (Positive Impression) and $p < .05$ (Campaign Materials).
 n= 225

Table 10 demonstrates that amongst Pentecostals raised in the church, the coded religious reference was more effective than the obviously religious appeal and more effective than the appeal without religious content. Emotions and traits demonstrate similar effects. Respondents express higher positive emotions, lower negative emotions, and more positive trait evaluations in the coded condition, when compared to the obvious religious language condition.

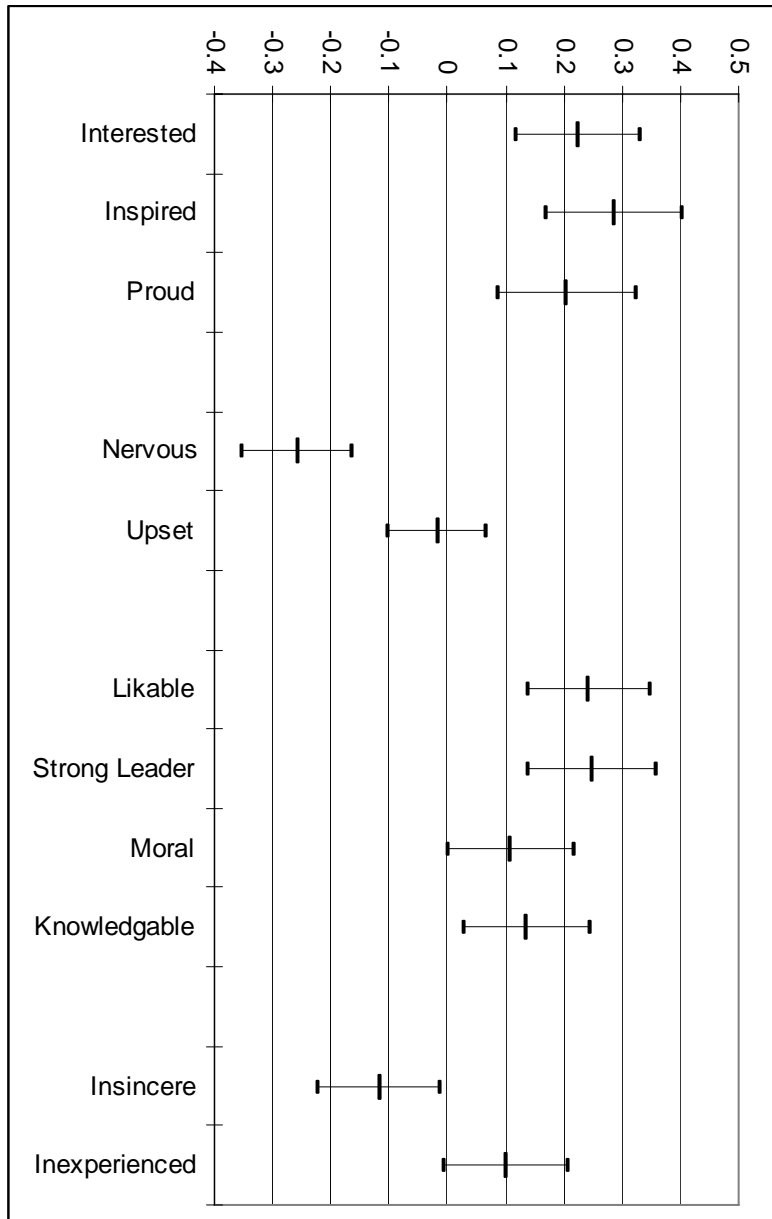
Table 11: Emotions & Traits, Raised Pentecostal



* indicates $p < .10$ based on a one-tailed test. Differences between the coded and no religious language conditions were significant at $p < .05$ (Positive Emotions, Positive Traits). Alphas: Positive Emotions (.90), Negative Emotions (.71), Positive Traits (.93), Negative Traits (.61).
 n=225

I also break these scales apart, to examine differences in means between the coded and obvious conditions. The difference in means on each component of the positive emotions scale and the positive traits scale is clearly above zero. This is consistent with my hypothesis that for the in-group, the coded appeal triggers more positive evaluations. I did not expect differences in negative evaluations, but the evidence on this is mixed. There are no clear differences on feeling upset or believing that the candidate is inexperienced, but respondents in the coded religious language condition do feel less nervous, and are less likely to report that the candidate is insincere when compared to the obvious religious language condition.

Table 12: Difference in Means, Raised Pentecostal

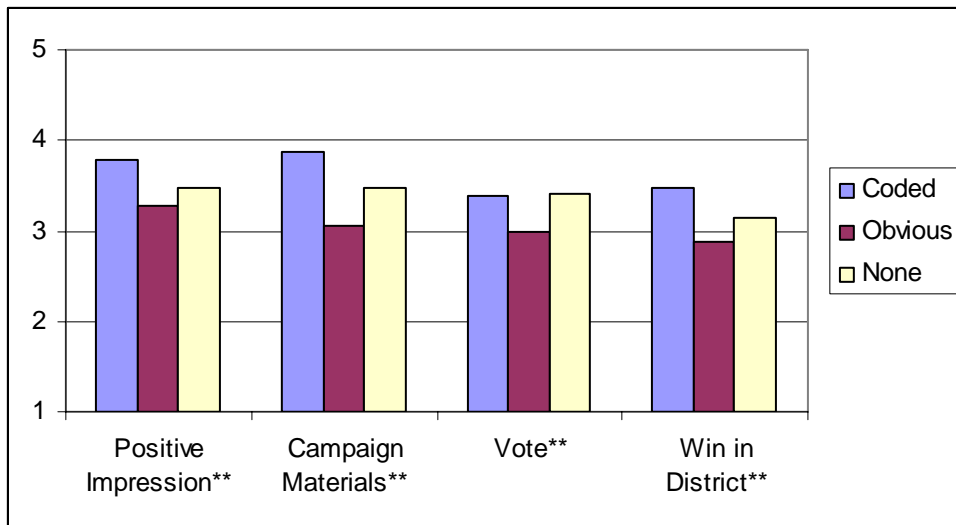


Differences are computed as Coded – Obvious, and confidence intervals were calculated based on .05 level of significance. Each dependent variable was measured on a five-point scale.
 n = 152

Finally, I analyze effects among African Americans. I expect that this candidate, who is white and does not offer a partisan cue, is a generally unattractive candidate to black voters, who tend to rely on partisanship, or racial similarity as cues that a candidate will represent their interests.

I expect that the candidate’s use of familiar language will bridge a larger gap for African Americans. In the obvious condition, I expect that the explicitness of the appeal will mitigate its effectiveness. It is also possible that in this case, the explicit appeal indicates that the candidate is not an in-group member after all. His reference to church is probably not an indication that he attends the same church as the African American respondents; African Americans who are Pentecostals are typically members of the Church of God in Christ, while white Pentecostals belong to other congregations, the most popular of which is Assemblies of God.

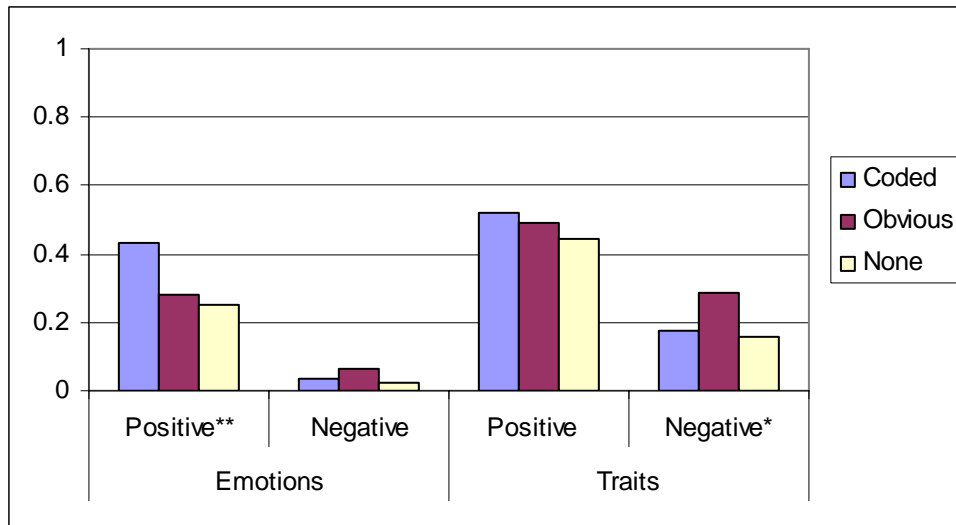
Table 13: African Americans



** indicates $p < .05$ using a one-tailed test. The difference between the Coded and No Religious Language conditions are significant at $p < .10$ for Positive Impression, Campaign Materials, and Win in District.
 n=56

African Americans are more favorable towards the candidate in the coded condition across all dependent variables. The coded condition respondents prefer the candidate when compared to the no religious language condition, and the differences are greater when compared to the obvious religious language condition.

Table 14: Emotions & Traits, African Americans



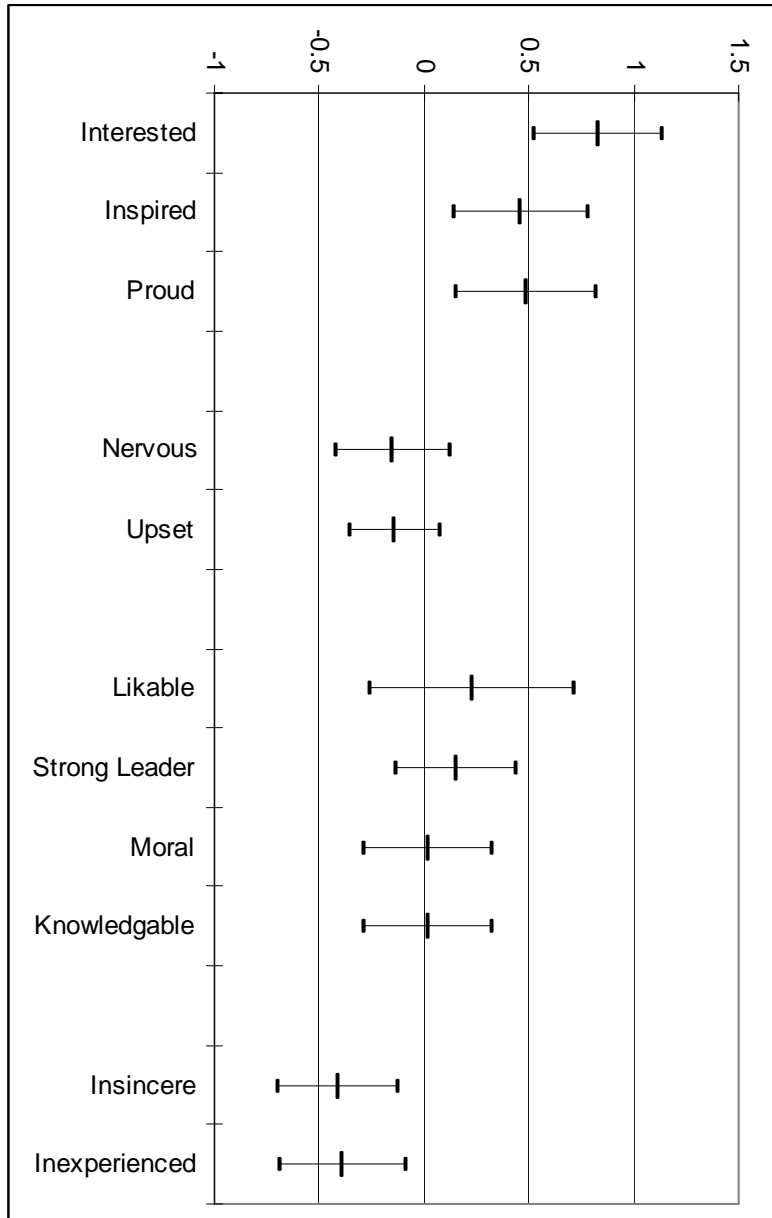
* indicates significance at $p < .10$, ** indicated significance at $p < .05$ based on a one-tailed test. The difference between the Coded and No Religious Language conditions was significant at $p < .05$ on Positive Emotions. Alphas: Positive Emotions (.91), Negative Emotions (.41), Positive Traits (.93), Negative Traits (.79).
 n=56

African American’s responses on emotions and traits tell a mixed story; when compared to the obvious religious language condition, the coded condition respondents express stronger positive emotions, and fewer negative trait evaluations.

I break apart these scales in order to further explore these effects. The candidate does not trigger negative emotions in the obvious religious language condition, but he does provoke more negative trait assessments; African American participants in the obvious religious language condition were more likely to think he was insincere and inexperienced. Conversely, while coded condition respondents were no more likely to offer positive trait assessments for the candidate, they did report higher levels of feeling interested, inspired and proud when compared to the obvious religious language condition. This finding offers some support for my hypothesis that differences between the coded and obvious conditions for African American respondents would be driven by both in-group effects, in the form of more positive evaluations in the coded condition, and out-group

effects, in terms of more negative trait assessments for the candidate who uses an obvious religious appeal.

Table 15: Differences in Means, African Americans

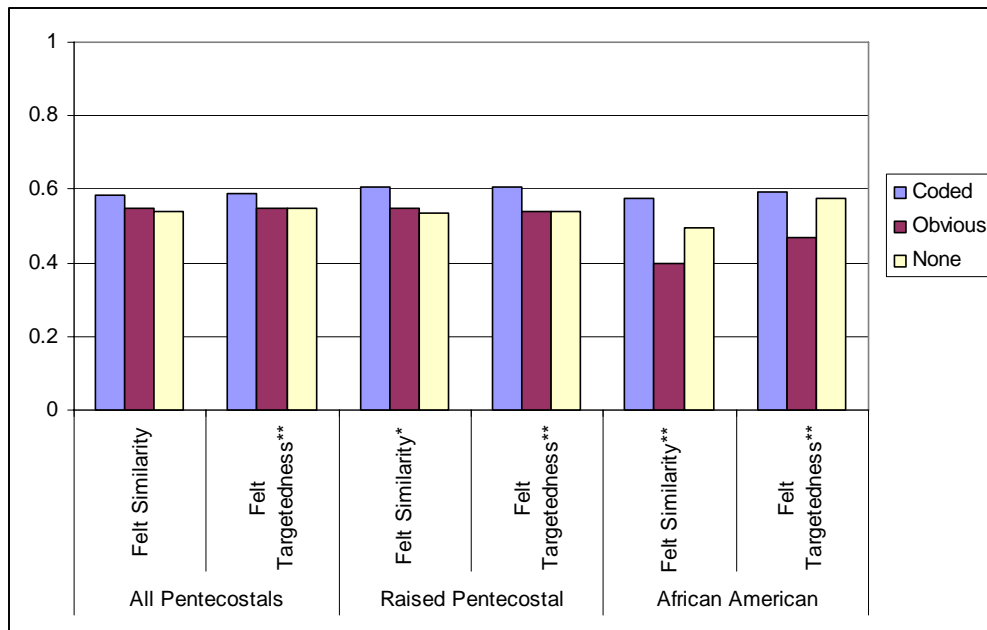


Differences are computed as Coded – Obvious, and confidence intervals were calculated based on .05 level of significance. Each dependent variable was measured on a five-point scale.
 n = 40

Felt Similarity and Felt Targetedness

Finally, I examine felt similarity and felt targetedness scales for each of the groups, and find that for each group, respondents exposed to the coded religious appeal felt more targeted by the campaign video when compared to their counterparts in the obvious religious language condition. Amongst those who were raised Pentecostal and African Americans, respondents in the coded condition also felt more similar to the candidate.

Table 16: Felt Similarity & Targetedness



* indicates significance at $p < .10$, ** indicated significance at $p < .05$ based on a one-tailed test. Alphas: Felt Similarity (.90), Felt Targetedness (.78).

African Americans also exhibit less feelings of similarity and targetedness in the obvious condition when compared to the no religious language condition, which is consistent with my hypothesis that they are susceptible to both in-group and out-group effects.

Implications

Study 2 provides support for the in-group side of my coded communication hypotheses. First, it demonstrates that Bush's use of the phrase "wonder-working power" was an example of coded communication: only 9% of the Princeton sample reported that they had heard it before, while 84% of the Pentecostal sample was familiar with the phrase. This study also demonstrates that amongst this group that was familiar with the coded language, they preferred the religious appeal when it was not made explicit. The appeal that was only available as religious to some was more appealing to them than the appeal with religious content available to all. While these findings were true of Pentecostals in general, the differences were more pronounced amongst Pentecostals with a longer history in the church. This study also provided support for the hypothesized in-group mechanism. I hypothesized that the effectiveness of coded appeals was rooted in more positive evaluations for the in-group. Respondents in the control condition did offer more positive evaluations in the coded condition when compared with the obvious religious language condition. However, the results on negative emotions and traits were mixed. Contrary to my expectations, these religious respondents did, on occasion, express more negative evaluations in reaction to the obviously religious appeal. Amongst those raised Pentecostal, the candidate made them feel more nervous and they were more likely to label him insincere when he used an obviously religious appeal. This suggests that the explicit appeal can be dangerous, even for an in-group.

African Americans further complicate a simple in-group/out-group dichotomy in this study. Differences between the coded and obvious appeal are largest for African Americans, perhaps because they can fall on either side of the split, depending upon the phrasing of the appeal. The obvious cue affiliates the candidate with a church, which is presumably not their church. This white candidate also had a particularly large gap to bridge when it came to black voters; without a partisan cue, they had no clear signal that the candidate was in touch with their interests. By using language

with religious content that was not universally available, he signaled an authenticity, which might have been cheapened when the appeal was made explicit.

Normative Implications

What are the normative implications of these findings? Are code words dangerous? Inevitable? While this is mainly an empirical analysis, meant to shed light on interpersonal communication, it is worth reflecting on what coded communication means for a democracy.

First, from the perspective of the listeners, is there anything deceptive about coded communication? Consider two key examples from Bush's rhetoric: wonder-working power and the Dred Scott reference. By saying "wonder-working power" George Bush signaled to evangelical Christians that he was one of them. Is this deceptive if others did not catch the signal? Bush's evangelical ties were hardly a secret. If he had simply traveled to an evangelical gathering to deliver his speech, he could have also communicated allegiance to that group without others knowing. Still, the ability to communicate allegiance to an in-group in the presence of an oblivious out-group is different from a trip to an evangelical community that communicated similar belongingness, even if the out-group was unaware of the trip. The key difference is that the out-group *could* know about that communication. If the trip were conducted covertly, then of course, the out-group might feel deceived upon learning about the trip. Coded language might be deceptive in the same way as the hypothetical covert trip. The Dred Scott references signals another, perhaps more dangerous deceptive element: that of communicating a policy position. If, as some commentators argues, the Dred Scott reference operated as an assurance to some that President Bush would not put pro-Roe v. Wade justices on the court, then those who did not get the reference were deprived of this information. This might be dismissed as an omission, rather than an outright lie, but the selective

nature of the omission still seems problematic. It is true that politicians consistently fail to reveal information, but coded communication allows this omission to be selective and strategic.

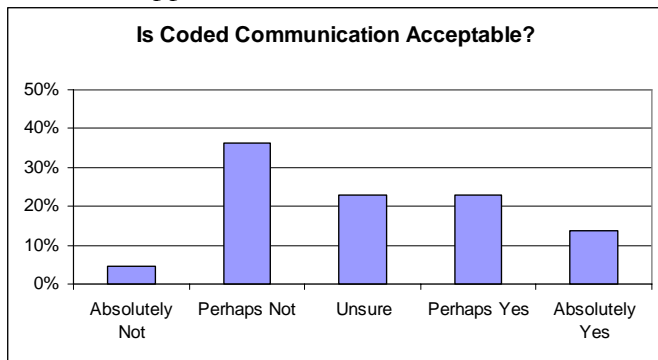
Another key element in untangling the normative aspects of coded communication is intent. Do speakers, or speechwriters intend to send signals to key constituencies and bypass others with their code words, or is coded communication simply the unintended consequence of living in a culturally pluralistic nation? Language that has a culturally specific meaning to a subset of the population seems unavoidable: how could we each “get” everyone else’s references? However, this inevitability does not imply that coded communication is never strategically planned. Particularly in the context of limited air time and limited attention spans, speeches such as the State of the Union are carefully crafted, and clearly each sentence is intended. The more important question is, was the language intended to bypass part of the population? Without access to speechwriters’ motives, the question is unanswerable. Gerson himself suggests, “they’re not code words, they’re our culture”, but does he calculate which cultural references are understood by which groups? Given the highly developed marketing strategy of modern political campaigns, the likely answer is yes. At a minimum, it seems reasonable to grant that at least sometimes, coded language is strategically designed to go over the heads of parts of the population.

If we grant that coded communication is sometimes deceptive, and sometimes intentional, then the democratic implications become easier to evaluate. Intentions to deceive the public stand in direct contrast to Kant’s publicity principle: “All actions that affect the rights of other men are wrong if their maxim is not consistent with publicity.” According to Kant’s analysis, language is wrong if the speaker believes it relies on its secrecy. This chapter offers an empirical complement to Kant’s analysis by answering the question; the secrecy involved in coded language contributes to its persuasive power.

Kant’s analysis has been criticized as too strong (surely some forms of deception are not only acceptable, but desirable) and too weak (should we rely on the public official to judge whether her acts rely on secrecy?). Gutman and Thompson (1996) point out that the publicity principle requires that justifications could be made public: hypothetical rather than actual publicity. They argue that only public justification can gain consent of the governed. Bok (1978) also pushes Kant’s analysis further, claiming that the acceptability of deceptions should be decided by random others: that no one should be systematically excluded. In evaluating whether lies are right or wrong, these groups might evaluate other strategies available to the speaker, and the costs and benefits of the strategies.

What if the use of coded appeals has the consent of the governed? At the end of a small, unrelated survey (Chapter 3, Study 1), subjects were asked whether they thought coded communication was acceptable in politics.

Table 17: Approval of Coded Communication



Source: 2005 Wright Community College IAT Study, n=22
 Question Wording: Political candidates and public officials sometimes use language that has a special meaning for some people, without others noticing. Do you think this is acceptable?

Survey results indicate that there is no consensus on this question. The disperse responses could suggest confusion over the question, which is vague. However, respondents were offered “unsure” as a response option and most chose not to use it. These findings suggest that people are reluctant

to completely reject coded communication in politics, but there is diversity in how comfortable they feel about its use.

Conclusion

The main finding of this chapter is that for religious appeals, coded communication is particularly persuasive in politics. The religious content can evade the out-group, and reach the target audience, without relying on selective exposure. This chapter also contributes to our understanding of similarity cues. Subtlety in similarity cues contributes to their persuasive power. Language with meanings that can bypass those most hostile to their message, and signal a heightened level of intimacy with those most amenable to their message might be particularly strategic in an age when a proliferation of media outlets compete to break stories, and politicians cannot count on their targeted message to stay with their targeted audience.

When considering the normative issues related to coded communication, two arguments lead me to conclude that there is no unqualified answer regarding whether or not coded communication should be a part of acceptable discourse in a democracy. First, in a country with cultural pluralism, coded communication of this sort is inevitable. A diverse population cannot be expected to understand everyone's references, and speakers cannot always anticipate which references will go over the heads of their audience. Also, speaking to a group in language that resonates with them is strategic, but it might also be genuine. However, the Dred Scott example leads to the second argument that shapes my normative concerns over coded communication in politics: coded references can allow a politician to communicate a policy commitment to an in-group, in front of an oblivious out-group. Politics around abortion are contentious, and a politician can choose to avoid talking about the issue. However, coded references make this omission selective, because outsiders

are not equipped to even hear the message. They do not know that a contentious issue was invoked, and therefore cannot respond.

The Dred Scott reference did appear in the press though, along with the wonder-working power reference, and each coded reference that appears in this chapter. Though the reports rarely make it beyond blogs, it is clear that some people are looking, and the more mainstream media could pick up on the stories. The phenomenon is gaining attention, and now has a name-- “dog-whistle politics”-- which reached William Safire’s column on language in April 2006. Still, it is unclear whether publicity after the fact takes away the initial power of the coded reference; not everyone will hear the explicit version, and if they do, they may not be motivated to change their initial evaluation. Also, particularly well crafted coded messages will be difficult to detect, and from the outside, it is impossible to know just how much communication is taking place under the radar.

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