

## Who Cares? Investigating How Voters Perceive Empathy in Candidates for Office

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**Abstract:** While prior scholarship demonstrates the importance for political candidates to convey to voters that they “care” about people like them, no systematic research examines why some candidates are viewed as more compassionate than others. In an era where television and social media put candidates’ personalities front and center, this lack of research is problematic. In this manuscript, I seek to explain why some candidates are viewed as more compassionate than others. I argue that voters view a candidate as compassionate when they identify a commonality that links them to the politician. A commonality indicates that the politician is empathetic, or able to understand the feelings of another, rather than sympathetic, which means she is only aware of those feelings. I generate a classification system for the ways in which voters identify empathy in a politician, including commonalities based on a shared experience, a shared emotion, and a shared identity.

Keywords: Empathy, Character Traits, Candidate Evaluation, Public Opinion, Survey Experiments

## Introduction

*“I’m an angry voter, how ’bout that? I’m angry about the way the country is working for the blue-collar worker.”* – Dave Williams of the Cement Finishers Local 179<sup>1</sup>

*There are few places that have been more devastated by our trade policies than Pittsburgh... I’m angry at our leaders for being so damn stupid.* – Donald Trump<sup>2</sup>

In the aftermath of the 2016 election, political pundits puzzled over how a candidate who committed so many perceived gaffes managed to garner enough votes to prevail in the Electoral College. Critics struggled to understand how the country had elected Donald Trump, a man who during the campaign sparred with everyone from Republican Speaker Paul Ryan to a gold star family speaking about their son, a fallen U.S. Army Captain. *Vanity Fair* summed up these feelings when they ran a column simply entitled, “Oh God, How Did This Happen?”

Yet for all the hand-wringing and head-scratching that followed the outcome of the election, quotes like the ones above help illuminate why Donald Trump was able to hold together a winning electoral coalition: Trump was able to connect with voters in a way his opponent, Hillary Clinton, was unable to. Many white working-class voters saw in Trump a man willing to fight for the ideals they valued—someone who would not bend to the political establishment.

The personal connection that existed between Trump and blue-collar voters might seem surprising at first. Donald Trump was not known for his humble beginnings. He had not lived the average middle-class American life, nor had he spent decades in public service championing policies to benefit the poor, working, and middle classes. Through his bravado and gold-plated lifestyle, Trump never tried to portray himself as the “common man.” Yet for all the apparent disconnect with average Americans, Trump exuded an anger and disgust with status quo politics that connected with people who had backgrounds that differed greatly from his own.

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<sup>1</sup> Washington Post, “Super Tuesday II,” March 15, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Trump speech in Pittsburgh, PA. April 13, 2016.

In this manuscript, I argue that citizens want to vote for someone with whom they can connect. I show that strong perceptions of compassion are based on connections that center on a shared experience, emotion, or identity. Prior scholarship has too frequently treated compassion in a politician as an intrinsically valuable character trait without examining why citizens want it in a leader or how citizens determine whether a politician has it. I offer a theory that explains why voters view some politicians as more compassionate than others. In examining perceptions of compassion, I argue that we must first distinguish between sympathy and empathy. While both of these traits may be defined as compassion, they are not equal in the eyes of voters. A sympathetic politician will claim to care about Americans and want to better their lives, but an empathetic politician will find a common bond with the voter that lends credibility to that claim. This commonality suggests that the politician can more easily put themselves in the shoes of the voter and will, therefore, be more willing and motivated to solve the problems people face.

Empathy, I show, is perceived in various ways. A key feature of my theory is a more expansive conceptualization of political empathy that involves a classification scheme for the ways in which voters come to view a politician as truly caring about people like them: A shared experience; a shared identity; or a shared emotion. While Donald Trump may have lacked many common experiences to link himself to working class voters, it was through shared emotion that he found a connection with voters who came from backgrounds different from his own.

### **Prior Research on Compassion and Empathy**

The need for richer theory regarding voters' perceptions of candidate traits is clear once we consider certain characteristics of the American voter. Scholars have long recognized the importance of static partisan and group attachments for determining vote choice (Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002), yet the outcomes of elections shift based on the

changing preferences of a small number of voters (Stimson 1991). Adding complexity to the issue of vote choice and electoral accountability, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) find that a large proportion of Americans lack basic political knowledge, making it difficult for voters to punish political leaders based on policy positions and past performance (e.g. Achen and Bartels 2016). Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) posit that Americans do not want to take an active role in crafting policy, and would rather leave decisions to leaders they believe are competent.

Given this political landscape, it becomes clear why Americans fall back on their perceptions of candidate character. Generating an impression of a candidate, accurate or not, is relatively easy in a news cycle that provides daily sound bites from the campaigns and often focuses on personal narratives. Unlike some traditional forms of electoral accountability, focusing on character traits does not require a firm grasp of the issues. Prior research shows that voters often use cognitive shortcuts, or heuristics, to arrive at voting decisions (see e.g. Lupia 1994, Popkin 1991). When voters believe that a candidate “cares” about people like them, it indicates that the politician is uniquely motivated to deliver on a better life for those people.

Studies looking specifically at political compassion in the American context, however, are few and far between, largely because researchers examine compassion in the broader context of candidate traits. While Fenno (1978) and Mayhew (1974) describe the ways in which members of Congress endear themselves to constituents by building empathetic bonds, Kinder’s (1986) work on presidential character marked a shift in the literature away from the actual traits of politicians toward their perceived traits. He also sets up a framework for classifying candidate traits, including competence, leadership, integrity, and empathy. Despite this, scholars studying voter behavior both in the United States and abroad have struggled to define the precise dimensions of character that matter to voters. In fact, scholars working in this field have

estimated there to be as few as two and as many as six different character dimensions (see e.g. Aaldering and Vliegenthart 2016; Greene 2001; Johnston 2002). The review of the character traits literature by Aaldering and Vliegenthart (2016) shows little consensus in the field, demonstrating the need not only for clearer definitions, but for greater theory on why each trait matters to voters. Aaldering and Vliegenthart go on to argue, as many others working in the traits literature have (e.g. Bean and Mughan 1989; Bittner 2011; Brown et. al 1988; Lord et. al 1984), that empathy and compassion play an important role in shaping the preferences of voters.

In the United States, where political behavior is characterized by strong partisan identities and motivated reasoning, some scholars argue that the causal arrow runs in the opposite direction. These scholars claim that opinions about particular candidate traits are the outgrowth of partisan attachments and global evaluations (Bartels 2002; Lodge and Taber 2013). Research in the literature on character traits, however, convincingly shows that Americans have distinct opinions about individual traits that do not fit on a single dimension. These opinions then impact global evaluations (Funk 1996, 1999; Hayes 2005). Despite the correlated nature of partisanship, global evaluations, and trait evaluations, perceptions of candidate compassion continue to have an independent effect on vote choice and public approval (Campbell 1983; Greene 2001; Holian and Prysby 2011, 2014, 2015; Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986).

The shift from print media to television and social media has made a candidate's personal touch increasingly important (e.g. King 2002; Kriesi 2012), and made it equally important for political science to examine character traits individually rather than as parts of the larger whole. Furthermore, scholarship demonstrates that the importance of a candidate's "image" in determining electoral outcomes has grown in recent years (McAllister 2007; Stewart and Clarke 1992; Wattenberg 1998). Despite these developments, political science has been silent on how

voters evaluate candidates on the various dimensions of character. Perceptions of character traits are malleable (McCann 1990; Sullivan et al. 1990) and can change as candidates take issue stances (Clifford 2014), so identifying precisely what affects these perceptions will help electoral scholars better understand the dynamics of political campaigns.

### **A Theory of Political Empathy**

While voters want a politician who “cares about” people like them, no systematic research exists to explain why some candidates are perceived as compassionate while others are not. Because citizens are generally ill-informed (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996) and lack ideological constraint (Converse 1964), trait-based heuristic strategies represent an opportunity to understand why some campaigns succeed and others fail.

I argue that voters seek politicians who are compassionate because they believe that candidate can be trusted to look out for their best interests. As Kinder (1986) suggests, people seek to ascribe a motivation for the actions of politicians, which is made easier if they believe they understand what kind of person each leader is. Having a positive perception of a leader can make citizens find excuses when the politician fails, or give them credit for achieving things for their constituency that might have been out of their control. Most voters do not have the time or energy to understand the intricacies of policy-making, nor is it reasonable to demand that from them. Without these factors to influence voting decisions, voters will fall back on their perceptions of whether a candidate is a good person who truly cares about people like them.

Holian and Prysby (2015), in their examination of character traits, pay special attention to what they define as empathy. Their definitions provide a useful point of departure for this work. They show that believing a candidate “cares about people” is a strong determinant of vote choice. I contend, however, that the definition they and others use for “empathy” is problematic.

Holian and Prysby (2015) define empathy as “the recognition of another person’s emotions, to feel what another person feels,” yet go on to say, “we can regard empathy as comprising compassion, concern, understanding, sympathy, and a general ability to feel what others feel, to walk in others’ shoes” (pg. 29). This definition has been used by scholars for decades,<sup>3</sup> yet it is problematic for political science to be unclear about the distinctions between sympathy and empathy when cognitive psychologists define them as distinct.

Psychologists define sympathy as the process through which someone becomes aware of another’s affliction and recognizes it as something that should be alleviated (Mercer 1972, Nagel 1970). It is the “emotional response stemming from the apprehension or comprehension of another’s emotional state or condition, which is not the same as what the other person is feeling (or is expected to feel) but consists of feelings of sorrow or concern for the other” (Eisenberg 2000, 671-672). Sympathy, then, is not about a personal understanding as to *why* another is pained, but instead it is simply the awareness that another is experiencing a negative emotion.

Whereas sympathy is a heightened awareness for the pain of others, psychologists define empathy as an attempt on the part of one person to understand the subjective experiences of another (see e.g. Wispé 1986). The difference boils down to being *aware* of another’s feelings (sympathy) vs. *understanding* another’s feelings (empathy). As a result, an empathizer may be viewed as better able to relate to someone in pain than a sympathizer might. While a sympathizer might witness an injury and feel bad for the victim, the empathizer views the same injury with the ability to understand the emotional process the victim is enduring. Sympathy and empathy, though closely related, are the byproduct of different cognitive processes and, when those traits are perceived by voters, force individuals to react differently to the candidates.

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<sup>3</sup> Scholars use the National Election Studies (NES) item on whether a candidate “cares about people like you” as measuring empathy, when this better fits the broader concept of compassion.

## **Empathy, Sympathy, and the Sincerity Barrier**

Delineating the differences between empathy and sympathy is essential for understanding how candidates can and will go about cultivating positive perceptions of compassion and ultimately higher favorability ratings. This distinction is important because compassion should matter to voters when they ask themselves two questions: 1) Is the candidate aware of the problems citizens face in their day-to-day lives?; 2) Do I believe the candidate when she says she will fix those problems? With regard to the first question, either a candidate's sympathetic or empathetic appeal should be sufficient for letting Americans know she is aware of the problems they face. Yet with regard to the second question about the sincerity and authenticity of a candidate's message, a sympathetic appeal may not be as effective as an empathetic one.

Prior scholarship provides evidence to suspect that empathy may be a stronger motivator in winning over public opinion than sympathy. Scholars in sociology find that empathy, when perceived in others, is connected to perceptions of strong leadership. Studies of workplace environments demonstrate the close ties empathy and effective leadership have in organizational settings (Cooper & Sawaf 1997; Goleman 1998; Yukl 1998). Individuals who see leaders as empathetic also view them as more credible and trustworthy (George 2000; Lewis 2000). Building on this research, Kellett, Humphrey, and Sleeth (2002) identify empathy as one of two distinct behavioral routes that influence perceptions of whether someone is a good leader.

While sociological studies connecting empathy and leadership focus on the interactions of a small number of people, the theory logically extends into electoral politics. Voters look to leaders who do not need a crash course in what life is like for most Americans and would rather elect someone who is both empathetic enough to understand the problems of voters and knowledgeable enough to deliver on the policies that will remedy those problems.



Unlike empathetic appeals, a sympathetic appeal does not imply the politician has the ability to put herself in the shoes of another. The voter might be suspicious of the sincerity of a politician who claims to “care” about less fortunate Americans but has little in her personal history to lend credibility to this claim. Despite this, I suspect that the degree to which an individual is suspicious of a politician’s claim will vary based on whether the individual is skeptical of the politician they are evaluating. If there are other sources of commonality that exist beyond shared experience, a sympathetic appeal may be sufficient. For the purposes of this research, I posit that individuals who do not share the partisanship of a politician should be more skeptical of these types of appeals than those who are copartisans.

### **Dimensions of Empathy**

In studying the various, yet ultimately congruent ways in which psychologists have defined empathy and differentiated it from sympathy, it becomes clear that empathy in the individual operates as an extension of self. The empathizer can feel the emotions of another as if they were her own precisely because the line between the two individuals is blurred. Most people unconsciously engage in empathetic behavior, where the concept of self is extended to another, though individuals vary in terms of their empathic capabilities.

Empathy as an extension of self can be thought to operate as concentric circles, with those who are closer to you as being the easiest objects for empathy. This idea is not new. Individuals feel stronger connections to those in their families, to those in their communities, to those in their states, countries, regions, and so on (Nussbaum 1996; Slote 2001). Beyond this, there are ties based on culture, such that people who belong to the same race or ethnicity may feel a deeper bond and be able to blur the line between self and other more easily (Dawson

1994). Within the United States, traits such as race, religion, and class can influence the people with whom one identifies and for whom one can more easily empathize.

While these traits refer to an individual's ability to empathize with another, they also play a large role in how we perceive whether another will empathize with us. People who share little in common in terms of identity or experiences often do not believe they have common interests, so their attitudes toward government and society are not likely to align. Whether we consciously think about it, we understand that politically salient identities shape our life experiences, which in turn shape our individual political attitudes and our feelings toward government.

It is for this reason that I consider the ways in which we perceive empathy in candidates for public office as more complicated than true empathy. The better a candidate for public office can convince the voters that they reside in one of the smaller concentric circles that define empathic capabilities, the easier it will be to win them over. There are a number of cues that Americans receive that suggest a candidate can, indeed, blur the line between themselves and the voter. These cues are transmitted via commonalities such as experience, emotion, and identity.

### *Experiential Empathy*

Political empathy, as the literature in psychology notes, implies that the politician has the ability to experience whatever hardship the voter is experiencing **as if** it were her own. How can a politician convey to voters that she has first-hand knowledge of the issues they face? With experience, the connection between politician and voter should be relatively straight-forward and go something like: "The American people are facing hardships and I have handled hardship too. So I know what it's like to have felt the same concerns you are experiencing." Bill Clinton is noteworthy in his use of personal experiences to connect with others. When Bill Rafsky, an AIDS activist, expressed skepticism that Clinton would do anything to address the AIDS crisis,

Clinton pointed to his own friends who had died of AIDS as evidence to the contrary. When he famously told Rafsky, “I feel your pain,” many believed him.<sup>4</sup>

With empathy of this type, the personal backgrounds of the voter and politician matter a great deal. Still, it is noteworthy that campaigns have some control over how the personal biography of the candidates is conveyed. Barack Obama, for example, spent much of his early childhood in Indonesia before living with his grandparents in Hawaii while attending an elite private school. Little about this background was likely to connect with Americans, yet when Obama spoke of his personal story, he chose not to focus on the more privileged aspects of his upbringing, but on the strength and struggles of his mother as she died of ovarian cancer. “I remember just being heartbroken, seeing her struggle through the paperwork and the medical bills and the insurance forms,” Obama said in a 2007 speech. “So I have seen what it’s like when somebody you love is suffering because of a broken health care system.”<sup>5</sup>

As the Obama example demonstrates, experiential-based empathy in politics normally manifests itself as economic hardship, though I do not rule out the possibility that there are other experiences that can serve as similar linkages to the voting public. Candidates focus on economic anxieties because most Americans, even those relatively well-off, are worried about future financial security. If a candidate can convince voters that they understand at a personal level the kind of anxiety average Americans face, they can appeal to a broad array of voters.

### *Emotional Empathy*

While experience is one of the more recognizable ways in which voters can perceive empathy, another type of empathy is often the one we see discussed in the day-to-day events of a campaign. Emotional empathy refers to the idea that a candidate feels the same way Americans

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<sup>4</sup> Clinton question and answer session, March 27, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Chicago Tribune, “Obama’s mother in new ad,” September 21, 2007.

feel about the problems facing the country and its people. When Americans feel the same way about government as the politician does (which I refer to as emotional resonance), it suggests that the politician understands just how motivated the voter is to see change enacted.

Emotional empathy, as I have argued, was a strong factor in explaining Donald Trump's 2016 victory. Donald Trump's brash demeanor and "tell-it-like-it-is" attitude won over a large majority of America's white working-class voters, while Hillary Clinton's years in Washington and ties to the banking industry did not provide a strong contrast with Trump's wealthy background. While neither Clinton nor Trump found themselves greatly advantaged in terms of experiential empathy, Trump was consistently perceived as more authentic (Hahl, Kim, and Sivan 2018), in part I argue because of the emotional aspect of his candidacy.

The emotional aspect of empathy is critical because it conveys to voters the urgency of the moment. In 2012, why would a voter, especially one who is disillusioned about politics, feel motivated to throw Barack Obama out of office if they felt his opponent, Mitt Romney, didn't appear emotionally invested in the fight? The same could be asked for John Kerry, who similarly had to fight the perception that he was out-of-touch, not only because of his personal wealth but because of his perceived lack of emotion (Yates 2016). If empathy is an attractive trait in a politician, as I posit, because it implies that the politician will not only be qualified to solve a problem, but *motivated* to solve the problems facing average Americans, then emotional empathy is critical in answering the question regarding motivation. Trump and Romney may have both argued that big government was killing job growth in America, but the anger Trump directed at the government convinced many Americans that, unlike Mitt Romney, Trump understood the gravity of the problem and was prepared to do something about it.

### *Identity-Based Empathy*

The final pathway to perceptions of empathy I consider is identity. Unlike experiential and emotional empathy, empathy based on identity does not require an explicit appeal. When the voters and the candidate share salient identities, it expresses the candidate's ability to understand how people live and the belief systems that dominate their thought processes. The way scholars have sought to measure empathy is through a survey item that asks if a politician "cares about people like you." While I have argued that "cares" is a term loaded with meaning and can be divided along dimensions of sympathy and empathy, the phrase "like you" is equally important in determining how an individual will respond to the question. Who belongs in the group of "people like you" can vary from person to person. A vast literature explores individual reactions to the candidates based on the use of stereotypes. Namely, these works explore race (Jones 2014; Karl and Ryan 2016; McDermott 1998; Piston 2010), gender (Fox and Oxley 2003; Dolan 2014; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Sanbonmatsu 2002), and even occupation (Campbell and Cowley 2014; McDermott 2005). For any individual voter, the identities that are most salient will serve as the most crucial for determining whether a politician will be empathetic toward them.

The identities that should be most relevant to perceptions of empathy are those identities that align with one's political party. As Mason (2018) argues, when one's racial or religious identity aligns with their partisanship (such as being black and a Democrat or white and a Republican), individuals show greater in-group preference and out-group antipathy. This should also be true for perceptions of compassion. White Democrats, who are out of alignment in terms of race and partisanship, may not care whether a Democratic politician is white or black. White Republicans, however, should care a great deal. Since their race and partisanship align, those

identities reinforce one another. A white Democrat should therefore be perceived as more empathetic than a black Democrat, who does not have a commonality to link them.

With race, the empathetic cue is straight-forward. All experiences we have as individuals are strongly tied to our racial identities, such that those who are co-ethnic or co-racial have undoubtedly had experiences similar to our own. In part, this explains why congressional districts overwhelmingly choose politicians who belong to the same racial group as the majority of their voters (Mansbridge 1999; Pitkin 1967; Swain 1993). While many factors play into this, race provides a cue to voters about what issues and what types of people will be first and foremost in the minds of the politicians when they craft policy. Dawson (1994) finds that race can be more important than personal experience in determining one's own vote, as even wealthy black voters will support the candidate they believe will be better for the group as a whole.

While Barack Obama's life experiences were not typical for most African Americans, Obama was something that no other major party presidential nominee had ever been: non-white. Black voters, then, could see in a presidential candidate an identity that held special importance to them. For Obama and black voters, race could serve as a cue that he understood the unique burden imposed on the black minority in the United States.

While it is not often put in these terms, identity politics has a close relationship with empathy. I posit that genuine empathy is one of the most important reasons that voters want descriptive representation in government. Americans support politicians who are both aware of the problems they face and sufficiently motivated to solve them. Experience with a problem provides a politician an understanding of it. Emotion indicates to voters a desire to do something to solve the problem. With identity, there is both; a voter can infer that they have had similar

experiences to a politician, and they can also infer that the politician will be motivated to help people who belong to that group as well.

### **Research Design**

To test for the importance of experiential, emotional, and identity-based empathy, I examine the results from three separate survey experiments. In all three surveys, respondents are randomly treated with a candidate for office of differing characteristics. These characteristics center on a family experience, an emotional orientation toward politics, and racial identity. Depending on the characteristics of the respondents themselves, I hypothesize that these shared characteristics should lead to higher evaluations on measures of compassion.

All three surveys present respondents with David Allen, a fictional congressional candidate running for office in the upcoming election.<sup>6</sup> In the first experiment, David Allen makes either a sympathetic appeal for votes or an empathetic one. In the second experiment, Allen evokes either anger or hope in an emotional appeal to explain his motivation for seeking public office. In the third experiment, Allen is presented to respondents as being either white or black. I expect that respondents will infer the character traits of the politician (namely how empathetic they are) based on these characteristics.

#### **Experiment #1: 2016 SSI**

To measure the importance of experiential empathy and test for the existence of the “sincerity barrier” facing politicians employing sympathetic appeals, I rely on a survey experiment administered in 2016 on a volunteer sample of 1,432 respondents<sup>7</sup> from Survey

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<sup>6</sup> In an attempt to maintain a high level of ecological validity, respondents were told that David Allen was running for Congress outside of the respondent’s district.

<sup>7</sup> This represents the total sample used after eliminating respondents who failed an attention check (a minimum time of 10 seconds spent reading the vignette) at the outset of the experiment.

Sampling International (SSI).<sup>8</sup> The experiment portrays David Allen, a fictitious politician, making either a sympathetic appeal, an empathetic appeal, or an appeal with no direct claims of compassion to voters. While the nonrandom sampling procedure results in a pool of respondents that is somewhat younger and better educated than the voting-eligible population, any bias due to the sampling procedure exists across both treatment and control conditions, meaning that differences between treatment and control are attributable to the experimental manipulation.

The experiment was designed to isolate the mechanism central to the theory undergirding experiential empathy and the sincerity barrier. I use a fictitious politician but provide enough detail to make him seem real. While the respondent is unfamiliar with David Allen, this lack of knowledge would not be unusual for a House candidate, especially for one early in the campaign cycle. Furthermore, this design limits any influence global evaluations of Allen could have on individual trait evaluations, since respondents have no prior knowledge about him. I manipulate both the message he conveys to supporters as well as his partisanship in order to examine the effect of having firsthand personal experience with hardship. Because some respondents will share Allen's partisanship and others will not, I can examine whether empathetic messages more effectively overcome the sincerity barrier I suggest should be highest when the voter and the politician are not copartisans. For the following treatments, all respondents read the introduction and were then randomly assigned to read one of the three conditions.

***Introduction:*** *David Allen, a local grocery store owner, is running for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives as a [DEMOCRAT/REPUBLICAN]. He is forty-eight years old and has two children with his wife of twenty years. While he has long been a prominent citizen in his community and active in local politics, this is the first time he has run for Congress.*

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<sup>8</sup> SSI is a suitable platform to test these messages because, though the sampling technique was not purely random, SSI aims to be representative of the voting age population in the United States. Scholars who have examined SSI samples find that their surveys yield highly accurate results that replicate the relationships found in surveys using probability-based sampling methods (see e.g. Ansolabehere and Rivers 2013; Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012). Analyses presented apply probability weights based on age, race, education, and income.



**Control:** *In his first public speech since filing to run for office, Allen told the crowd, “I am asking each and every one of you for your vote this upcoming November election.”*

**Sympathy:** *In his first public speech since filing to run for office, Allen spoke of how much he cares about struggling families as his motivation for running. Allen told the crowd, “I care about the neighborhood mailmen and the part-time secretaries. I’ve heard the stories of grandfathers who worked as coal-miners to scratch out a living but couldn’t even afford indoor plumbing. I’ve talked to families who have lived this hardship, and I care about those struggling to make ends meet. I’m running for Congress to help those Americans. I am asking each and every one of you for your vote this upcoming November election.”*

**Empathy:** *In his first public speech since filing to run for office, Allen spoke of his own history growing up in a struggling family as his motivation for running. Allen told the crowd, “My dad was the neighborhood mailman and my mom worked as a part-time secretary. My grandfather worked as a coal-miner to scratch out a living but couldn’t even afford indoor plumbing. My family has lived this hardship, so I understand the struggles of those trying to make ends meet. I’m running for Congress to help those Americans. I am asking each and every one of you for your vote this upcoming November election.”*

The differences between the empathy and sympathy treatments are subtle yet important. In the sympathy treatment, David Allen invokes the people he has met on the campaign trail (as politicians so often do) as his motivation for enacting positive change in office. Yet here there is nothing personal that leads a voter to think he is especially motivated to solve the problems of others. In the empathetic treatment, the mailman and the secretary are not abstractions he has learned about from the campaign trail but are instead central pieces of his family identity. For individuals approaching Allen with suspicion, having blue-collar values in his bloodstream should be more convincing than claiming to have had contact with blue-collar Americans.

### **Experiment #2: August 2018 Mechanical Turk**

The second experiment I examine looks at the effect of emotional resonance, or a shared emotional orientation toward government between politician and respondent, on perceptions of compassion. I hypothesize that when the feelings of the respondent and candidate align, there will be stronger perceptions of compassion. I administered the survey from August 1-2 on a

sample of 989 respondents via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk).<sup>9</sup> The survey first asked respondents how they felt about the American government and politics in general. Respondents could rate how angry, anxious, enthusiastic, or hopeful they felt from "not at all" to "a great deal" (a 1-4 scale). In order to have a measure for how relatively angry or hopeful each person was, I classified individuals as being "more angry" if they said they felt more angry than hopeful toward government, "more hopeful" if the opposite was true, or "neutral" if they said they felt equally angry and hopeful about politics. Respondents were then randomly treated with a message from David Allen designed to be similar to the previous experiment. One message evoked hope and the other message evoked anger, but they were otherwise identical:

***Anger/Hope Treatment:** David Allen, a local grocery store owner, is running for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. In his first public speech since filing to run for office, Allen spoke of his [ANGER AND IRRITATION/HOPE AND OPTIMISM] about the state of the nation as his reason for running. Allen told the crowd, "When I see what's happening in this country, I can't help but feel [TICKED OFF/HOPEFUL]. I believe the time has come for people to step up and do something. I'm running for Congress because I know I can get something done for everyday Americans. I am asking each and every one of you for your vote this upcoming November election."*

The difference between the treatments was subtle in order to maintain the internal validity of the experiment. Candidates who appear angry often identify the features of politics that serve as the source of that anger (such as unfair trade policies or the avoidable deaths of those who lack health insurance). Candidates who appear hopeful often hold up the strength of the American people as their source for hope. Bringing these ideas into the vignettes would have made the treatments stronger and more realistic, but they would no longer have been different purely on the basis of the emotion evoked. As a result, I focus the manipulations in this experiment on mentions of the emotion and make sure the remaining text is identical.

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<sup>9</sup> Despite the non-random nature of the sampling procedure, the literature on experimental research using MTurk finds that researchers can make credible inferences regarding the relationships between treatments and outcomes of interest (Berinsky et al. 2012; Krupnikov and Levine 2014).

### **Experiment #3: July 2018 Mechanical Turk**

Finally, I examine the impact of sharing a salient identity on perceptions of compassion by using an experiment nearly identical to the previous two. I administered the survey from July 14-16 on a sample of 665 respondents. As in the previous two experiments, respondents for this survey also read a story about congressional candidate David Allen making a plea for votes. The text of the vignette was identical to the control condition for Experiment #1. For this experiment I attached a picture to the treatment that varied the race of David Allen as either white or black.<sup>10</sup> Because some will infer partisanship based on the race of the politician, the survey vignette explicitly stated that David Allen was a Democrat. The sample was limited to white and black respondents, with an oversample of black respondents in order to examine how white and black respondents react to co-racial candidates.<sup>11</sup> In order to ensure that white and black respondents received a roughly similar number of co-racial vs. different race appeals, I block randomized assignment to the two treatments by the race of the respondent.<sup>12</sup> For every respondent, I constructed a variable based on whether or not the appeal they received was “coracial,” or coming from a politician who shared the same race as the respondent.

#### *Dependent Variables Used*

In all three of the experiments, respondents rated David Allen on the same evaluations (full wording in the appendix). Following the vignettes, respondents were asked how well “he really cares about people like you” described Allen. Respondents also rated whether they had a favorable or unfavorable view of Allen. For ease of interpretation, both of these dependent

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<sup>10</sup> Treatments, including the photographs used, can be found in the appendix.

<sup>11</sup> The sampling procedure yielded 300 black respondents and 365 white respondents.

<sup>12</sup> For black respondents, 148 received the white candidate treatment and 152 received the black candidate treatment. For white respondents 184 received the black candidate treatment and 181 received the white candidate treatment.

variables in the following analyses have been standardized from 0 to 1 so that differences between groups can be interpreted as the percentage point change across the response scale.

By randomly assigning respondents to the conditions I can examine support for David Allen across messages by comparing mean levels of support across all conditions in all three experiments. The random assignment of subjects to the treatments across all the experiments was successful; as a result, I proceed in this manner in the next section.<sup>13</sup> Due to the success of random assignment to the conditions, differences in the dependent variable across conditions can be attributed to the manipulation rather than potential confounders (Kinder and Palfrey 1993).

## **Results**

### **Experiential Empathy**

I examine experiential empathy through the effect of sympathetic and empathetic appeals, paying special attention to the effects among individuals who should be highest in skepticism toward such messages. The results portrayed in Figures 1 and 2 represent the increase in perceptions of David Allen's capacity for compassion when respondents are treated to a sympathetic or empathetic message. I look first at the overall effect of both the sympathetic and empathetic appeals relative to the baseline, shown by the first two bars in the figures. I also examine the differences between the sympathetic and empathetic appeals. Finally, I consider the differential effects for the appeals among those who share David Allen's partisanship (copartisans) or those who belong to the opposing party (antipartisans). Antipartisans are those who should most require an empathetic appeal, since skepticism among them should be highest.

Figure 1 shows the effect of sympathetic and empathetic appeals on perceptions of compassion. I find that David Allen is not surprisingly seen as more compassionate when he makes some sort of compassionate appeal. Even the sympathetic appeal increases positive

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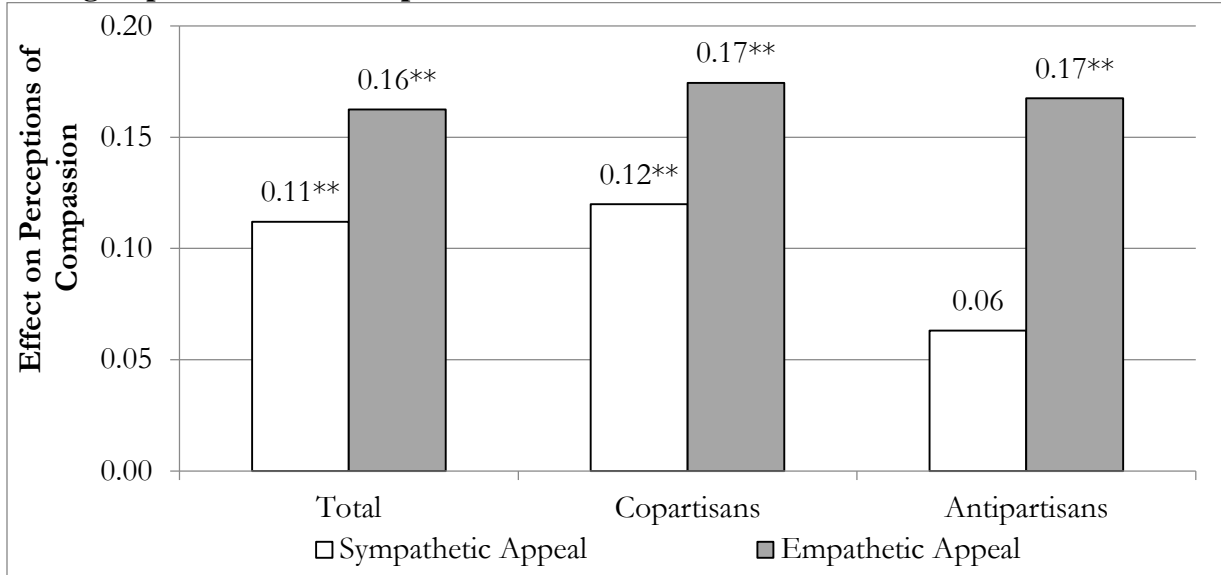
<sup>13</sup> All randomization analyses can be found in the appendix.

perceptions of Allen's compassion by greater than 10 percentage points. Candidates who cannot make credible empathetic appeals, then, are well-served by claiming to care about less fortunate individuals even if there is no personal history to lend credibility to that claim.

What is more interesting, however, is that the empathetic appeal outperforms the sympathetic appeal by an important 5 percentage point margin. This margin doubles when looking only at those individuals who belong to the opposing party. For context, antipartisans in the control condition give Allen a rating of 0.42 (on a 0-1 scale) on compassion. For individuals in the sympathy condition, the number rises but stays below the 0.5 threshold. For antipartisans in the empathy condition, however that number rises significantly to 0.59. While Allen is a fictional candidate without the baggage of many real politicians, the fact that individuals from the opposing party on average view him as truly caring about people like them is noteworthy.

I also examine the possibility that sympathetic and empathetic appeals are strong enough to improve not only specific evaluations of compassion, but translate to overall favorability. As shown in Figure 2, the results are mixed. While compassionate appeals boost approval for David Allen, the difference between a sympathetic and empathetic appeal is more muted. Still, these results reaffirm the importance of empathy among those for whom skepticism is highest. While those who share David Allen's partisanship do not support him at higher rates when the empathetic appeal is made, those who belong to the opposing party view him in a significantly more favorable light if he points to his own personal experience as his motivation for caring.

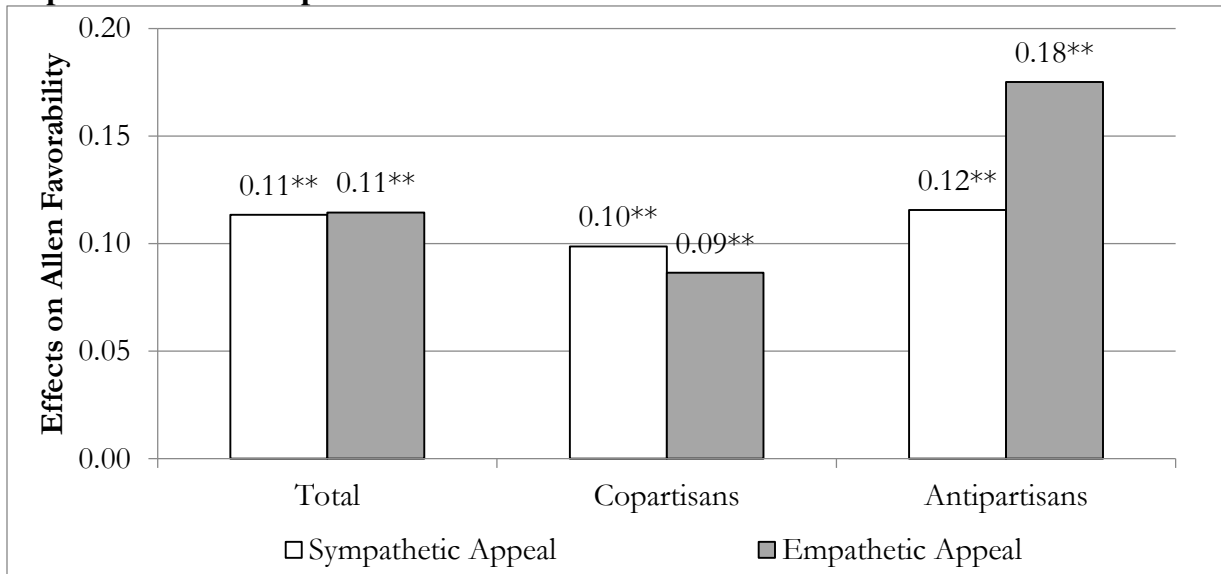
**Figure 1. Effect of Sympathetic and Empathetic Appeals on Perceptions of Compassion among Copartisans and Antipartisans**



\*\*Effects are statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$  (one-tailed test).

NOTE: Differences between the Sympathetic Appeal and Empathetic Appeal conditions are statistically significant for the total sample (at  $p < 0.05$ , one-tailed) and among antipartisans (at  $p < 0.01$ , one-tailed).

**Figure 2. Effect of Sympathetic and Empathetic Appeals on Candidate Favorability among Copartisans and Antipartisans**



\*\*Effects are statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$  (one-tailed test).

NOTE: Differences between the Sympathetic Appeal and Empathetic Appeal conditions are only statistically significant among antipartisans (at  $p < 0.05$ , one-tailed).

The results here present important implications for the types of campaigns candidates should run. It is noteworthy that antipartisans move the most on both perceptions of compassion

and favorability. This demonstrates just how important empathy is when it comes to questions of credibility. It is relatively easy to win over one's own copartisans. But if a candidate is in a district that requires cross-party appeal to be successful, making empathetic appeals, when they are possible, appears to be a smart strategy.

### **Emotional Empathy**

I test for emotional empathy by examining the impact of emotional resonance, which I define as when the voter and the politician feel the same way about government and politics in general. Again, I argue that those who share the emotion of a politician will be more likely to perceive that politician to be empathetic.

Before turning to the impact of emotional empathy on perceptions of compassion, I first consider the relationship that partisanship plays in the emotional orientation Americans feel toward government. Whether the party of an individual is in power or out of power should play a major role in how they feel about government at any given point in time. Furthermore, any politician who wishes to tap into a strong emotion in the American electorate must first be able to read the emotion of the American electorate correctly. After eight years of President Obama, Donald Trump was effectively able to tap into an anger and frustration felt widely in the Republican Party. Compared to Jeb Bush, whose more reserved demeanor earned him the nickname "low-energy Jeb,"<sup>14</sup> Trump appeared angrier and more motivated to take on the political establishment. Republicans responded positively to this emotion. At the time of this survey's administration, however, emotions had shifted.

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<sup>14</sup>Vox, Matt Yglesias, "Low-Energy': Donald Trump's favorite diss on Jeb Bush, explained." September 4, 2015.

Table 1 shows how Democrats, Republicans, and Independents<sup>15</sup> rated their emotions toward government and politics in general. While an overwhelming majority of Democrats said they felt greater anger than hope toward government, a plurality of Republicans said the opposite. This is important to note when interpreting the figures here, as there are times when emotional resonance does not lead to vastly improved ratings of compassion. These null results, however, are most often found among a group that is small in number and therefore less politically consequential, such as hopeful Democrats or angry Republicans. The results in this section suggest that when one’s emotion does not align with the dominant emotion of the party, the emotion plays less of a role in influencing perceptions of compassion.

**Table 1. Emotions of Partisans toward Politics in 2018 MTurk Survey**

	<b>More Angry</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>More Hopeful</b>
<b>Democrats (N=527)</b>	68.7 percent	14.4 percent	16.9 percent
<b>Republican (N=342)</b>	31.0 percent	23.7 percent	45.3 percent
<b>Independent (N=119)</b>	64.7 percent	14.3 percent	21.0 percent

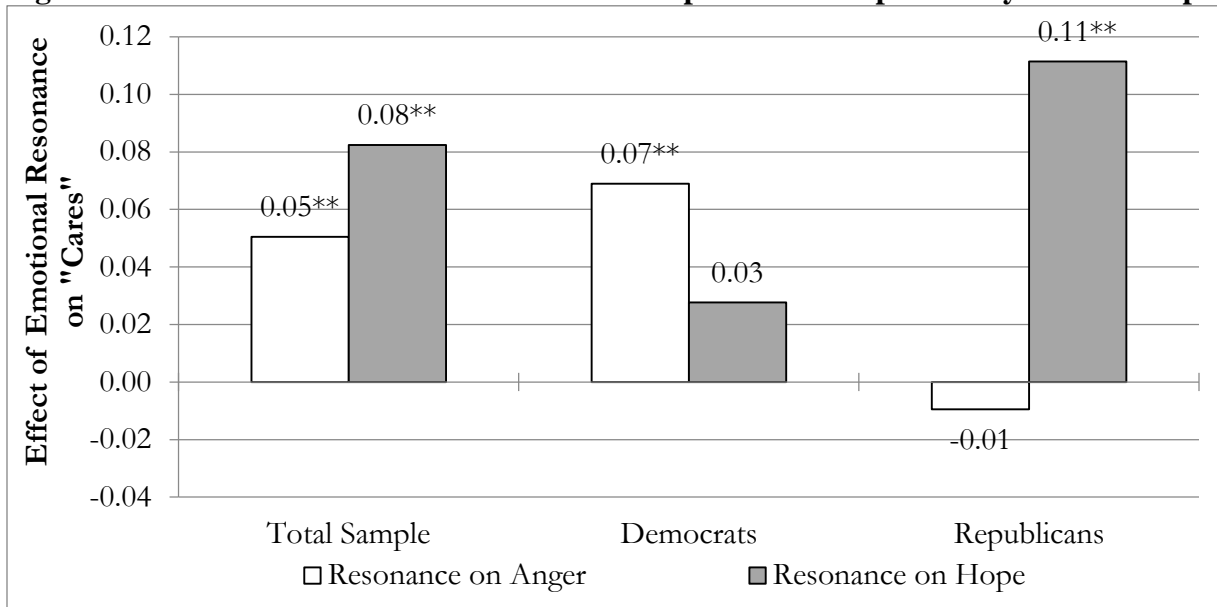
Turning now to whether a shared emotion drives positive perceptions of compassion, I examine ratings of David Allen on the “cares about people like you” item based on whether emotional resonance is present. Figure 3 shows that emotional resonance, defined as sharing the emotion the candidate is evoking, leads to more positive evaluations of compassion than when the politician evokes an opposing emotion.

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<sup>15</sup> “Independent leaners,” or those who claim to be politically independent but admit to leaning toward the Democratic or Republican Party, are grouped with partisans.



**Figure 3. Effect of Emotional Resonance on Perceptions of Compassion by Partisanship**



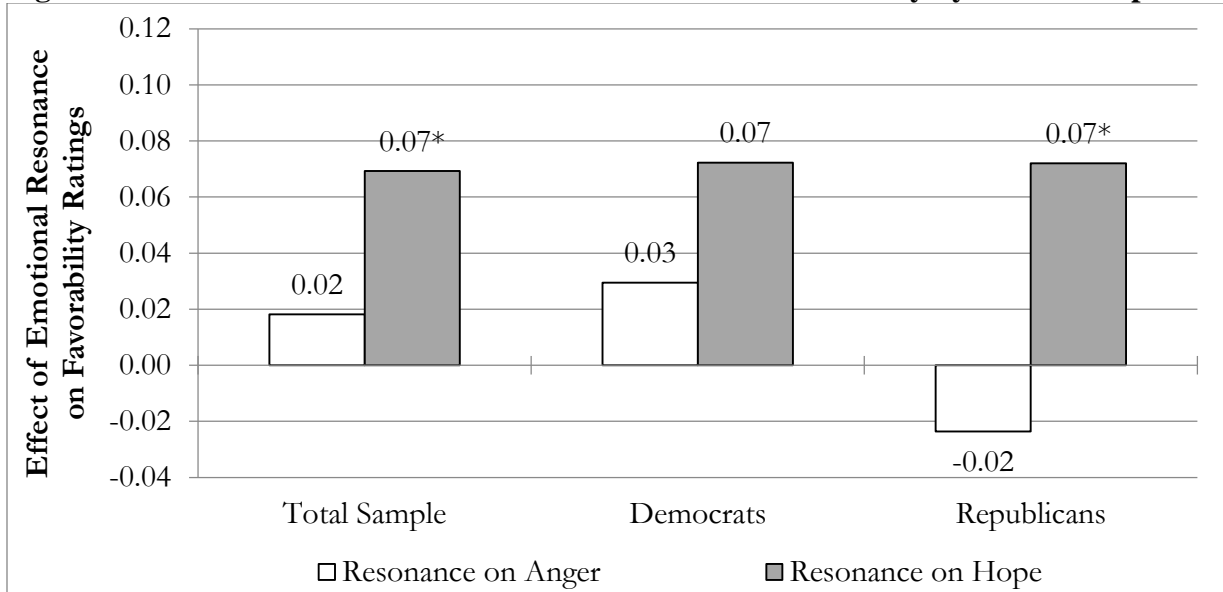
\*\*Effects are statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$  (one-tailed test).

Among all respondents, emotional resonance appears to increase perceptions that a candidate is truly compassionate. Among respondents who were more angry than hopeful about government, the anger candidate received higher evaluations on compassion by a margin of five percentage points. Among those who were more hopeful, the hope candidate was perceived as more compassionate by an even greater margin of 8 percentage points. Importantly, it is angry Democrats and hopeful Republicans who are driving the results here. Angry Democrats (which constitute the clear majority of Democrats) are substantially more likely to evaluate the anger candidate more favorably than the hope candidate. The margin for hopeful Republicans is even larger. In the age of Trump, a candidate evoking a tenor of hopefulness is rated more positively by Republicans than one who focuses on anger as his motivation for running.

Turning to measures of favorability, I find that candidate messages have less impact than they do on measures specific to the trait of compassion, yet emotional resonance still on average has a positive effect. Emotional resonance on hope continues to have a strong positive impact on overall favorability, but the effect sizes are noticeably smaller and nearly disappear for emotional

resonance on anger. This suggests that while emotional resonance may be enough to boost perceptions of candidate compassion, it is somewhat harder to boost overall favorability.

**Figure 4. Effect of Emotional Resonance on Candidate Favorability by Partisanship**



\* Effects are statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$  (one-tailed test).

What do these findings mean for politicians? Certainly, Republicans appear to be happy on the whole now that Donald Trump is president rather than Barack Obama. Yet the implications for Trump himself are unclear. It would be difficult for a president who was elected based on a wave of right-wing discontentment to suddenly appear cheerful about politics. In office, Trump continues to exude anger with the Democrats in Congress, the media, and the “deep state,” yet anger now appears to be associated most closely with Democratic voters.

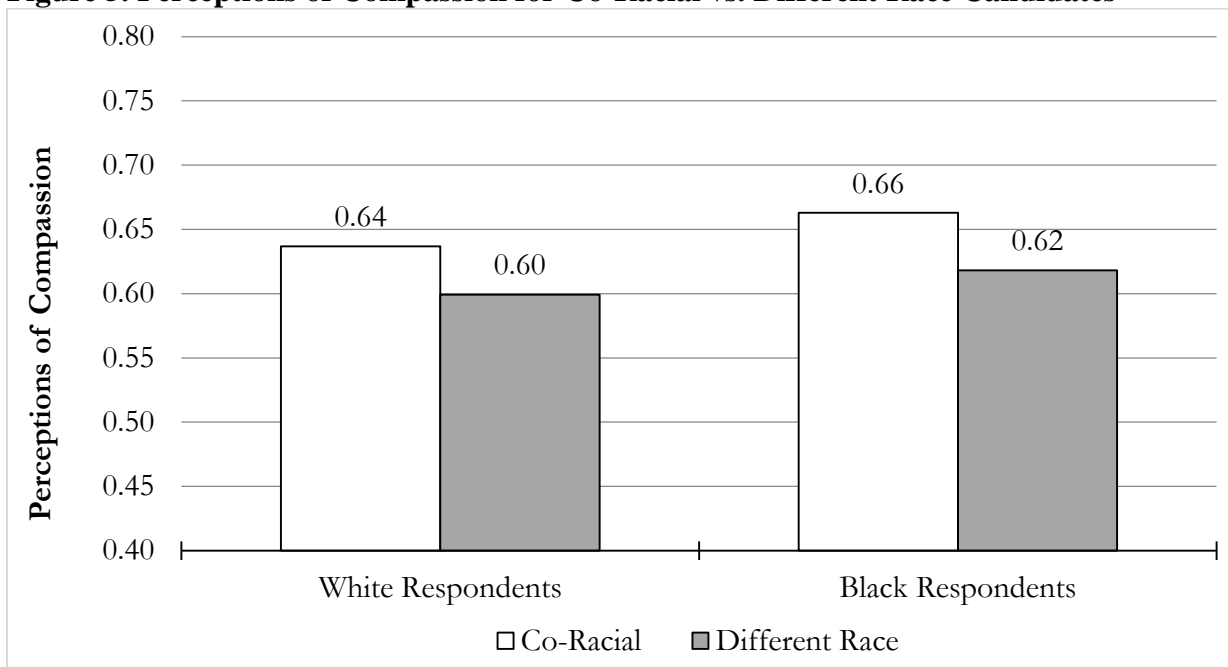
For the purpose of the 2018 midterm elections, it does not appear Republicans advantage themselves by mirroring the anger of President Trump. The results presented here suggest that they are served best if they remain upbeat about the direction of the country under President Trump and show a hope and optimism about the possibilities for the future if the Republicans can maintain control of Congress with Trump as president.

### **Identity-Based Empathy**

Finally, I look for evidence of identity-based empathy by examining reactions to David Allen when he is identified as either white or black. While many identities are politically relevant and are likely to determine the degree to which an individual views a politician as empathetic, I choose to focus on race as a source of identity-based empathy both for simplicity's sake and because race is one of the most historically important political identities (e.g., Dawson 1994; Tate 2003). I hypothesize that individuals who belong to the same racial group as David Allen will view him as more compassionate. Those who belong to a different group should view him as relatively less compassionate, even when partisanship is being held constant.

Across both white and black respondents, sharing the same race as the politician leads to significantly more positive evaluations on compassion. Overall, co-racial candidates receive about 4 percentage points more positive evaluations on the trait of compassion. For the total sample it is clear that the race of the candidate on its own is enough to cue voters into whether a politician is truly compassionate toward people like them.

**Figure 5. Perceptions of Compassion for Co-Racial vs. Different Race Candidates**

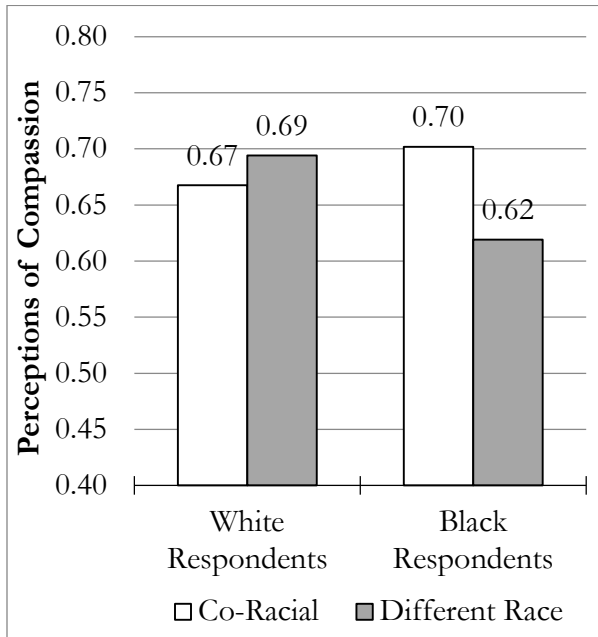


NOTE: The effect of being co-racial is statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ , one-tailed test.

Figures 6 and 7, however, show that the story is more interesting when we consider the partisanship of the respondent. For white Democrats, the white politician fares no better than the black politician. This is likely due to the fact that the Democratic Party coalition is more racially diverse and less reliant on the white vote. White Democrats are in some ways out of alignment, as the white vote has increasingly shifted toward the Republican Party. As a result, white Democrats likely feel a weaker attachment to their race than white Republicans, whose party relies more on the white voting bloc and has come to be associated with representing the interests of white Americans. Black Democrats evaluating a Black Democratic politician, however, rate the politician much more positively on compassion than they do the white Democratic politician.

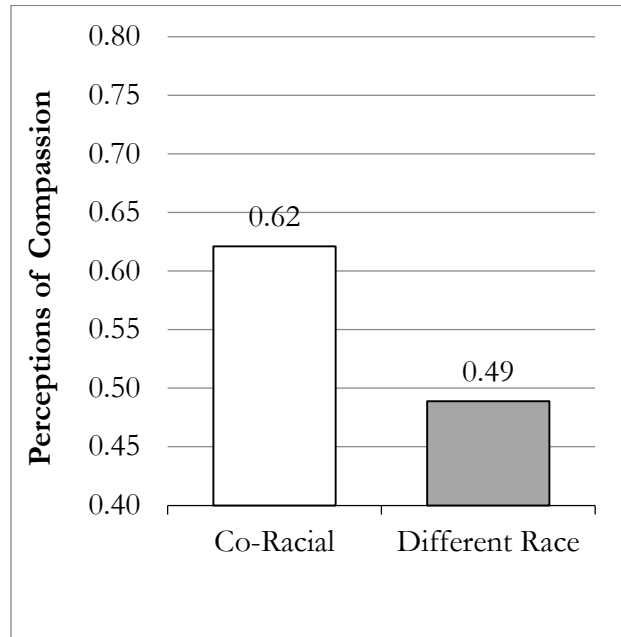
Among Republicans, there are an insufficient number of black respondents to examine them separately, but the impact of race among white Republicans is dramatic. Whereas white Democrats are no more likely to find a white Democratic politician compassionate than a black Democratic politician, Republicans see a huge difference. When David Allen is presented as a white Democrat, Republicans rate him highly, with a 0.62 (on the 0-1 scale). This is an incredibly high rating when we consider that the politician in the vignette was explicitly labeled a Democrat. Even in an era of high polarization, where Democrats and Republicans are at the very least thought to view each other with suspicion if not downright animosity, Republicans view the white Democrat as, on average, generally caring about people like them. Yet when David Allen is not presented as a white Democrat but is shown instead to be black, that rating plummets 13 percentage points. While Republicans do not view him in a completely negative light, they are far less willing to give Allen the benefit of the doubt that he cares about people like them when he is black. Race, when aligned with partisanship, clearly plays a strong role in determining whether a politician is viewed as compassionate or not.

**Figure 6. Among Democrats: Perceptions of Compassion for Co-Racial vs. Different Race Candidates**



NOTE: The effect of being co-racial is statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ , one-tailed test among black respondents.

**Figure 7. Among White Republicans: Perceptions of Compassion for Co-Racial vs. Different Race Candidates**



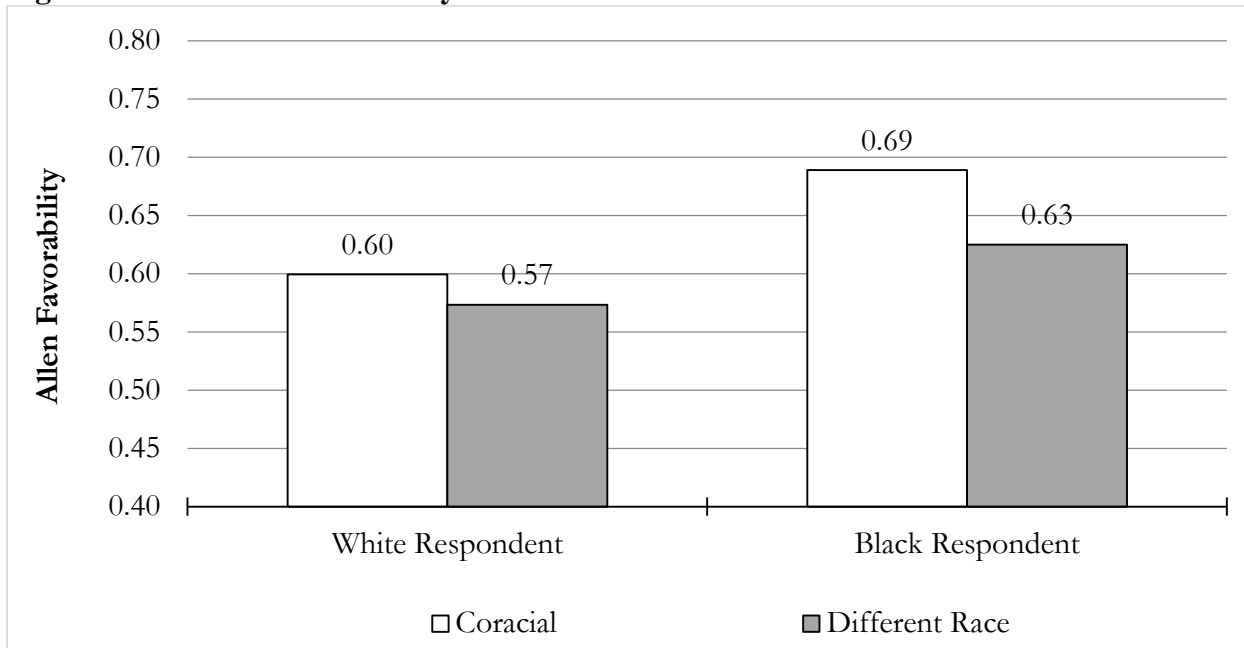
NOTE: The effect of being co-racial is statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ , one-tailed test among white respondents.

Figures 8, 9, and 10 show similar analyses on measures of general favorability. Shared racial identity leads generally to stronger levels of support for both white and black respondents. Again, the effects are driven by black Democrats and white Republicans. Figure 8 shows that citizens who share the same race as the candidate provide that candidate with higher favorability ratings. While the effect is much stronger among black respondents (likely due to black voters being more politically aligned with one party), the effects are consistent across race.

Looking at this within racial group, I find support for the assertion that when partisanship aligns with other salient identities, it plays an important role for how the voters perceive the politician. In figure 9, white Democrats give David Allen the same rating regardless of his race. For black respondents, however, the gap is substantively massive at 11 percentage points.

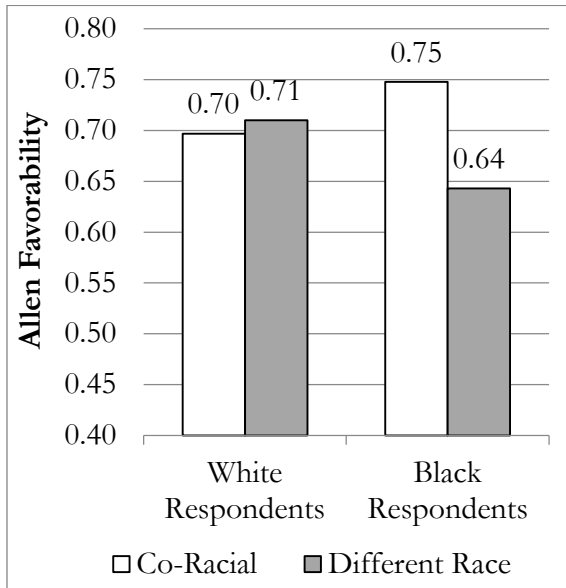
Again, as Figure 9 shows, white Republicans react differently than white Democrats. When the individual's race aligns with their partisanship, as is the case with white Republicans, they view the coracial politician as significantly more compassionate. Overall, white Republicans are very mixed with regard to David Allen when he is presented as a white Democrat. The 0.48 rating suggests that they may be open to supporting him in an election depending on the alternative provided. Yet when David Allen is presented as a black Democrat, favorability drops by 10 percentage points. These findings suggest that it is hard to reach across the partisan divide if it coincides with the racial divide.

**Figure 8. Candidate Favorability for Co-Racial vs. Different Race Candidates**



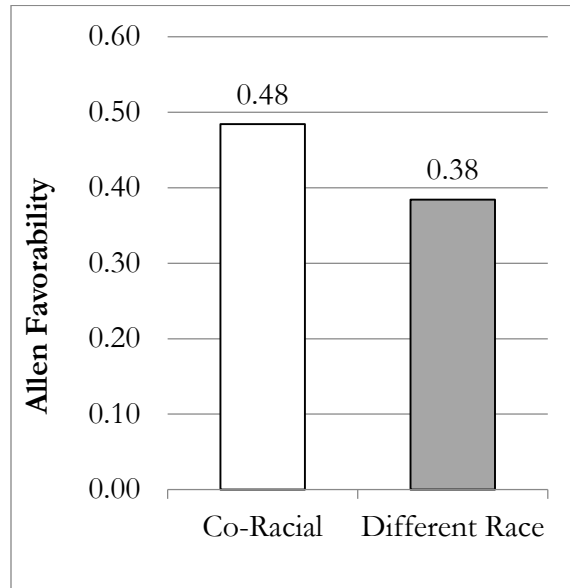
NOTE: The effect of being co-racial on favorability is statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ , one-tailed test.

**Figure 9. Among Democrats: Candidate Favorability for Co-Racial vs. Different Race Candidates**



NOTE: The effect of being co-racial on favorability is statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ , one-tailed test among black respondents.

**Figure 10. Among White Republicans: Candidate Favorability for Co-Racial vs. Different Race Candidates**



NOTE: The effect of being co-racial is statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ , one-tailed test among white respondents.

That race is an important determinant of political behavior is not a novel finding of this research. What is new, however, is that part of the role that race plays comes down to the degree to which citizens will view a politician as compassionate. A black politician does not need to make any kind of explicit appeal to black voters in order to be perceived as caring more about black people than a white candidate. In a Democratic primary, this phenomenon may be critical. A black candidate does not pay a cost in perceptions of compassion or favorability among white Democrats, but does benefit among the important black Democratic constituency. Conversely, a white Democrat can more effectively appeal to white Republicans in a general election than a black Democrat can. While not tested directly here, this phenomenon is likely to persist across multiple identities that are associated with the two parties (such as those based on gender, class, and religion). This has important implications for the types of candidates we see win primaries and the costs they might face in the general election.

## Discussion

The findings presented in this manuscript show that Americans base their evaluations of candidate compassion on the quantity and intensity of the commonalities that link them to politicians. While the potential sources of commonality are numerous, I have provided a simple classification scheme for these commonalities, which includes experiences, emotions, and identities. All of these common traits are powerful determinants of perceptions of compassion.

From the voters' perspective, these results are straight-forward. They support candidates they believe understand their problems. They want a leader who is not only aware of the concerns and anxieties they face, but can feel those concerns and anxieties as if those emotions were their own. This is made easier when the politician has had the same experiences as the voter, exudes the same emotion as the voter, or holds the same identities as the voter.

The implications of this research from the perspective of politicians and campaigns, however, are less clear. Certainly a candidate will be best served if she can demonstrate a clear linkage between herself and the voters through experience, emotion, and identity, yet these practices come with risk. I have shown here that credible empathetic appeals serve to increase perceptions of compassion among voters, yet not every candidate can make a credible empathetic appeal in all circumstances. Mitt Romney, for example, struggled to find experiences in his own background that resonated with working or middle class Americans. Hillary Clinton also struggled to cultivate positive perceptions of compassion. While she often pointed to her own mother's mistreatment as a child as one motivation for her political life,<sup>16</sup> the media focus on speeches she gave to Goldman Sachs and other Wall Street firms made it seem like she was more interested in enriching herself than helping others.<sup>17</sup> My research shows, however, that even

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<sup>16</sup> Hillary Clinton Campaign ad, "Family Strong." August 2, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> The Hill, "Sanders rips Clinton over Goldman Sachs ties." January 17, 2016.



when a credible empathetic appeal is not possible, making a sympathetic appeal can still generate a more positive public image. For politicians like John Kerry, Mitt Romney, and Hillary Clinton, who struggled to find personal stories that resonated with the American public, being viewed as empathetic may be difficult but being viewed as sympathetic may buttress some of the negativity on perceptions of compassion.

Emotional appeals clearly have a positive impact on perceptions of compassion, yet they must be employed with similar skill. Donald Trump was able to tap into much of the anger in the Republican base, yet few observers would suspect that his anger was inauthentic. If a politician is not truly angry or hopeful, it may be difficult for them to feign that emotion believably. Personal style, then, is a critical feature for this pathway to empathy. Donald Trump had been known for his bluster long before running for public office. John Kerry, on the other hand, had a lengthy political career prior to his presidential candidacy, was wealthy, and spoke with an upper-class mid-Atlantic accent. While there was a portion of the electorate in 2004 that was likely angry with George W. Bush's presidency, Kerry's style was ill-suited to tap into that anger. Similarly, politicians must be able to accurately read the emotions of the American electorate. As the survey data presented here shows, emotions are closely related with the partisanship of the individual and the party that is in power. Democrats in 2018 are overwhelmingly angry, while Republicans are on average more hopeful. Democratic candidates, then, that exude anger, are likely to have a major advantage over primary opponents that strike a hopeful tone. The independents in the sample, though small in number, also reflected an anger with status quo politics in the United States, suggesting that angry candidates in a general election are likely to have a leg-up on the competition.

A few caveats exist with regard to this research agenda. The fictional candidate I use across all three experiments provides several advantages in testing the theory I advance here, yet the sincerity barrier that drives the differences between empathetic and sympathetic appeals may be higher for real and polarizing candidates. Donald Trump, for example, may be so polarizing that no empathetic appeal could persuade those already skeptical of him. Future research should seek to identify the conditions under which the sincerity barrier is higher or lower. Finally, these results suggest the need for research on a host of character traits. While decades of scholarship have identified the dimensions of character that matter to voters, little research exists to explain why some politicians are perceived as better than others on these qualities. Greater scholarship on these traits will deepen our understanding of the dynamic relationship between voters, their elected representatives, and the campaigns that try to persuade them.

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## Appendix: Survey Instruments and Results

### 2016 SSI Experiment: Experiential Empathy

#### Treatment Wording:

**Control:** *David Allen, a local grocery store owner, is running for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives as a Democrat (Republican). He is forty-eight years old and has two children with his wife of twenty years. While he has long been a prominent citizen in his community and active in local politics, this is the first time he has run for Congress. In his first public speech since filing to run for office, Allen told the crowd, “I am asking each and every one of you for your vote this upcoming November election.”*

**Sympathy:** *David Allen, a local grocery store owner, is running for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives as a Democrat (Republican). He is forty-eight years old and has two children with his wife of twenty years. While he has long been a prominent citizen in his community and active in local politics, this is the first time he has run for Congress. In his first public speech since filing to run for office, Allen spoke of how much he cares about struggling families as his motivation for running. Allen told the crowd, “I care about the neighborhood mailmen and the part-time secretaries. I’ve heard the stories of grandfathers who worked as coal-miners to scratch out a living but couldn’t even afford indoor plumbing. I’ve talked to families who have lived this hardship, and I care about those struggling to make ends meet. I’m running for Congress to help those Americans. I am asking each and every one of you for your vote this upcoming November election.”*

**Empathy:** *David Allen, a local grocery store owner, is running for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives as a Democrat (Republican). He is forty-eight years old and has two children with his wife of twenty years. While he has long been a prominent citizen in his community and active in local politics, this is the first time he has run for Congress. In his first public speech since filing to run for office, Allen spoke of his own history growing up in a struggling family as his motivation for running. Allen told the crowd, “My dad was the neighborhood mailman and my mom worked as a part-time secretary. My grandfather worked as a coal-miner to scratch out a living but couldn’t even afford indoor plumbing. My family has lived this hardship, so I understand the struggles of those trying to make ends meet. I’m running for Congress to help those Americans. I am asking each and every one of you for your vote this upcoming November election.”*



Post-Treatment Question Wording:

Overall, how favorable or unfavorable is your impression of David Allen?

- 1 Strongly Unfavorable
- 2 Somewhat Unfavorable
- 3 Somewhat Favorable
- 4 Strongly Favorable

*Respondents then randomly assigned to read one of the following questions:<sup>18</sup>*

*Question 1:*

In your opinion, does the phrase, “he really cares about people like you” describe David Allen extremely well, very well, moderately well, slightly well, or not well at all?

- 1 Extremely well
- 2 Very well
- 3 Moderately well
- 4 Slightly well
- 5 Not well at all

*Question 2:*

In your opinion, does the phrase, “he really cares about people like you” describe David Allen very well, somewhat well, neither well nor poorly, somewhat poorly, or extremely poorly?

- 1 Very well
- 2 Somewhat well
- 3 Neither well nor poorly
- 4 Somewhat poorly
- 5 Extremely poorly

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<sup>18</sup> Scholars involved in carrying out this study preferred the answer options offered in Question 2 of the questions, though the options in Set 1 reflect those most often used in well-respected surveys (such as the ANES). The results between those who received Question 1 and Question 2 were not appreciably different. In the later surveys, I employ only Question 2.

Results: 2016 SSI Experiment

**Table A1: Treatment Effects of Compassionate Appeals on Dependent Variables of Interest (Control as Baseline)**

Condition	Cares (Full Sample)	Cares (Copartisans)	Cares (Opp. Partisans)	Fav. (Full Sample)	Fav. (Copartisans)	Fav. (Opp. Partisans)
<b>Sympathy Treatment (N=445)</b>	0.112**	0.120**	0.063	0.113**	0.099**	0.116**
<b>Empathy Treatment (N=427)</b>	0.162**	0.174**	0.168**	0.114**	0.086**	0.175**
<b>Constant (Control) (N=560)</b>	0.467**	0.530**	0.423**	0.591**	0.677**	0.500
<b>Prob&gt;F</b>	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
<b>N</b>	1,352	557	574	1,355	559	575

\*statistically significant at  $p < .05$  (one-tailed test)

\*\*statistically significant at  $p < .01$  (one-tailed test)

**Table A2: Randomization Check-Multinomial Logit Predicting Assignment to Condition (Control as Omitted Category, Standard Errors in Parentheses)**

Independent Variable	Sympathy Cond.	Empathy Cond.
<b>Age</b>	0.004 (0.005)	0.007 (0.006)
<b>Gender (Male)</b>	0.078 (0.163)	-0.236 (0.166)
<b>Race (White)</b>	-0.146 (0.190)	0.297 (0.198)
<b>Education</b>	-0.008 (0.063)	-0.088 (0.061)
<b>Income</b>	-0.019 (0.032)	0.020 (0.031)
<b>Ideology</b>	-0.020 (0.059)	-0.038 (0.064)
<b>Partisanship</b>	0.039 (0.046)	0.036 (0.047)
<b>Constant</b>	-0.195 (0.489)	-0.379 (0.485)
<b>Chi-Square</b>	0.421	
<b>N</b>	1,278	

## 2018 MTurk Experiment: Emotional Empathy

Treatment Wording:

**Anger/Hope Treatment:** *David Allen, a local grocery store owner, is running for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. In his first public speech since filing to run for office, Allen spoke of his [ANGER AND IRRITATION/HOPE AND OPTIMISM] about the state of the nation as his reason for running. Allen told the crowd, “When I see what’s happening in this country, I can’t help but feel [TICKED OFF/HOPEFUL]. I believe the time has come for people to step up and do something. I’m running for Congress because I know I can get something done for everyday Americans. I am asking each and every one of you for your vote this upcoming November election.”*

Pre-Treatment Question Wording:

Please rate how you feel about American government today and politics in general.

- A. Angry
- B. Anxious
- C. Enthusiastic
- D. Hopeful

Choices:

- 1 Not at all
- 2 Very little
- 3 Somewhat
- 4 A great deal

Post-Treatment Question Wording:

Overall, how favorable or unfavorable is your impression of David Allen?

- 1 Strongly Unfavorable
- 2 Somewhat Unfavorable
- 3 Neither Favorable nor Unfavorable
- 4 Somewhat Favorable
- 5 Strongly Favorable

In your opinion, does the phrase, “he really cares about people like you” describe David Allen very well, somewhat well, neither well nor poorly, somewhat poorly, or extremely poorly?

- 1 Very well
- 2 Somewhat well
- 3 Neither well nor poorly
- 4 Somewhat poorly
- 5 Extremely poorly

**Table A3: Treatment Effects of Compassionate Appeals on Dependent Variables (Hopeful Candidate as Baseline)**

Condition	Cares about People Like You			Favorability		
	Angry Respondent	Neutral Respondent	Hopeful Respondent	Angry Respondent	Neutral Respondent	Hopeful Respondent
Angry Candidate Treatment	0.050**	0.039	-0.082**	0.018	-0.035	-0.069*
Constant (Hopeful Candidate Treatment)	0.554**	0.590**	0.673**	0.567**	0.651**	0.670**
N	545	174	269	545	174	269

\*statistically significant at  $p < .05$  (one-tailed test)

\*\*statistically significant at  $p < .01$  (one-tailed test)

**Table A4: Treatment Effects of Compassionate Appeals on Dependent Variables (Hopeful Candidate as Baseline) – Among Democrats**

Condition	Cares about People Like You			Favorability		
	Angry Respondent	Neutral Respondent	Hopeful Respondent	Angry Respondent	Neutral Respondent	Hopeful Respondent
Angry Candidate Treatment	0.069**	0.074	-0.028	0.029	0.041	-0.072
Constant (Hopeful Candidate Treatment)	0.532**	0.615**	0.674**	0.555**	0.635**	0.692
N	362	76	89	362	76	89

\*statistically significant at  $p < .05$  (one-tailed test)

\*\*statistically significant at  $p < .01$  (one-tailed test)

**Table A5: Treatment Effects of Compassionate Appeals on Dependent Variables (Hopeful Candidate as Baseline) – Among Republicans**

Condition	Cares about People Like You			Favorability		
	Angry Respondent	Neutral Respondent	Hopeful Respondent	Angry Respondent	Neutral Respondent	Hopeful Respondent
<b>Angry Candidate Treatment</b>	-0.009	-0.009	-0.111**	-0.024	-0.097*	-0.072*
<b>Constant (Hopeful Candidate Treatment)</b>	0.660**	0.607**	0.678**	0.637**	0.679**	0.669**
<b>N</b>	106	81	155	106	81	155

\*statistically significant at  $p < .05$  (one-tailed test)

\*\*statistically significant at  $p < .01$  (one-tailed test)

**Table A6: Randomization Check-Logit Predicting Assignment to Anger Condition (Hopeful Condition as Omitted Category, Standard Errors in Parentheses)**

Independent Variable	Anger Condition
<b>Age</b>	-0.002 (0.006)
<b>Gender (Male)</b>	-0.245 (0.131)
<b>Race (White)</b>	0.103 (0.159)
<b>Income</b>	-0.015 (0.022)
<b>Partisanship</b>	0.032 (0.030)
<b>Constant</b>	0.059 (0.287)
<b>Chi-Square</b>	0.387
<b>N</b>	984

## 2018 MTurk Experiment: Identity-Based Empathy

Treatment Wording:

*Introduction:* Now we would like to get your opinion about a candidate running for Congress outside of your state. Please read the following excerpt from a newspaper article describing the announcement of his candidacy and then tell us what you think about him.

### **BLACK CANDIDATE TREATMENT**

David Allen, a local grocery store owner, is running for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives as a Democrat. He is forty-eight years old and has two children with his wife of twenty years. While he has long been a prominent citizen in his community and active in local politics, this is the first time he has run for Congress. In his first public speech since filing to run for office, Allen told the crowd, “I am asking each and every one of you for your vote this upcoming November election.”



David Allen

### **Q2b – WHITE CANDIDATE TREATMENT**

David Allen, a local grocery store owner, is running for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives as a Democrat. He is forty-eight years old and has two children with his wife of twenty years. While he has long been a prominent citizen in his community and active in local politics, this is the first time he has run for Congress. In his first public speech since filing to run for office, Allen told the crowd, “I am asking each and every one of you for your vote this upcoming November election.”



David Allen

Post-Treatment Question Wording:

Overall, how favorable or unfavorable is your impression of David Allen?

- 1 Strongly Unfavorable
- 2 Somewhat Unfavorable
- 3 Somewhat Favorable
- 4 Strongly Favorable

In your opinion, does the phrase, “he really cares about people like you” describe David Allen...

- 1 Very poorly
- 2 Somewhat poorly
- 3 Neither poorly nor well
- 4 Somewhat well
- 5 Very well

Results: 2018 MTurk Experiment: Identity-Based Empathy

**Table A7: Treatment Effects of Coracial Candidate on Perceptions of Candidate Compassion**

Condition	Full Sample	White Democrats	Black Democrats	White Republicans
<b>Coracial (N=333)</b>	0.041**	-0.027	0.083**	0.132**
<b>Constant (Different Race) (N=332)</b>	0.608**	0.694**	0.619**	0.489
<b>N</b>	665	188	209	131

\*statistically significant at  $p < .05$  (one-tailed test)

\*\*statistically significant at  $p < .01$  (one-tailed test)

**Table A8: Treatment Effects of Coracial Candidate on Candidate Favorability**

Condition	Full Sample	White Democrats	Black Democrats	White Republicans
<b>Coracial (N=333)</b>	0.044*	-0.013	0.105**	0.100*
<b>Constant (Different Race) (N=332)</b>	0.596**	0.710**	0.643**	0.384
<b>N</b>	665	188	209	131

\*statistically significant at  $p < .05$  (one-tailed test)

\*\*statistically significant at  $p < .01$  (one-tailed test)

**Table A9: Randomization Check- Logit Predicting Assignment to Race Condition (Different Race as Omitted Category, Standard Errors in Parentheses)**

Independent Variable	Among Black Respondents	Among White Respondents
<b>Age</b>	0.017 (0.011)	-0.007 (0.008)
<b>Gender (Male)</b>	-0.026 (0.252)	-0.015 (0.215)
<b>Income</b>	-0.035 (0.045)	0.006 (0.036)
<b>Partisanship</b>	0.068 (0.069)	-0.002 (0.049)
<b>Constant</b>	-0.971 (0.532)	-0.234 (0.452)
<b>Prob &gt; Chi<sup>2</sup></b>	0.458	0.944
<b>N</b>	291	353