Centering historically minoritized populations to design effective messages about an evidence-based policy to advance social equity

Jeff Niederdeppe [ID][a,b,*], Norman Porticella [ID][a], Jiawei Liu [ID][c,d], Jamila Michener [ID][b,e], Erika Franklin Fowler [ID][f], Rebekah H. Nagler [ID][g], Teairah Taylor [ID][a], Colleen L. Barry[b] and Neil A. Lewis Jr. [ID][a,b,h]

[a]Department of Communication, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853, USA
[b]Cornell Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853, USA
[c]STEM Translational Communication Center, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA
[d]Department of Advertising, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA
[e]Department of Government, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853, USA
[f]Department of Government, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT 06459, USA
[g]Hubbard School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA
[h]Weill Cornell Medical College, New York, NY 10065, USA
*To whom correspondence should be addressed: Email: jdn56@cornell.edu
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Abstract

Researchers have raised concerns that messages describing racial disparities in social outcomes can reduce or polarize support for public policies to address inequality. We questioned this assumption by testing the impact of carefully crafted messages about child tax credit (CTC) expansion. We conducted two randomized message trials, study 1 using Prolific's nonprobability panel ($n = 1{,}402$) and study 2 using SSRS's Opinion Panel, a web-based probability sample of US adults ($n = 4{,}483$). Each study included comparably sized subsamples of Black, Hispanic, and White respondents from across the political spectrum. Study 1 compared six candidate messages to a control message and identified promising message strategies for replication. Study 2 compared two messages advocating for CTC expansion—one emphasizing policy benefits to all children (universalist) and the other describing benefits to all but even greater benefits to Black and Hispanic children (targeted universalist)—to a control message simply describing the policy. Primary outcomes were policy support and policy advocacy intentions. Study 2 tested preregistered hypotheses and conducted additional exploratory analyses using linear models. Both treatment messages produced greater policy support and advocacy intentions than the control message among Black and Hispanic respondents (Cohen's d 0.12 to 0.28). The universalist message also produced greater policy support than the control message among White respondents (Cohen's $d = 0.16$). The targeted universalist message did not reduce policy support or advocacy intentions among White and Republican respondents. Well-designed messages emphasizing policy efficacy can promote support for a redistributive tax policy across racial, ethnic, and political identities.

Keywords: communication, social policy, policy advocacy, health equity, social equity

Significance Statement

This study offers both scholarly and practical insights on messaging about redistributive social policy in the United States. We offer initial evidence for strategies to increase support and intentions to advocate for a highly effective policy, child tax credit expansion, across racial/ethnic and partisan lines. We find no evidence that centering information about racial/ethnic disparities in childhood poverty and racial equity-enhancing policy effectiveness causes backlash among White or Republican audiences, a critical observation in the context of previous declarations of concern about this outcome. Most importantly, centering perspectives from historically minoritized populations (Black and Hispanic US adults) revealed unique insights into policy communication effects that would not have been apparent with a more racially homogeneous sample of predominantly White respondents.

Introduction

Racial disparities in health and social outcomes in the United States are shaped by public policies (1, 2), but policies can also reduce racial inequalities (3–5). For example, a 2021 temporary expansion of the US child tax credit (CTC) reduced childhood poverty across racial groups but had particularly large impacts

among Black and Hispanic children (6). These outcomes have led advocates and researchers to explore strategies for effective communication about such policies and their impact, with the goal of building broad public support and mobilizing citizens to advocate for their passage and implementation (7).

Some researchers have raised concerns that messages emphasizing racial disparities in social outcomes can reduce or polarize support for redistributive policies to address inequality (e.g. between White and non-White individuals; between Republicans and Democrats) (8–11). Much of the work underpinning these conclusions, however, is based on findings from research with samples of exclusively or predominantly White respondents. This work has tended to test short messages presenting disparity information without consideration of their structural causes or policy solutions (7). Given the prevalence of misunderstandings that blame individual dispositions and behavior for health and racial inequality (12–14), longer-form messages that consider structural causes and/or policy solutions may be better suited to build support and motivate action (15, 16). Prior work has also emphasized policy attitudes or policy support as primary outcomes, with far less work gauging intentions to advocate for policy change (7, 17). Centering perspectives from populations that are disproportionately impacted by a social problem, while also focusing on policy advocacy intentions, may yield different answers. To test these suppositions, we conducted two studies, using large and comparatively sized samples of Black, Hispanic, and White respondents across partisan political identities. We examined whether carefully designed longer-form messages could promote policy support and intentions to advocate for CTC expansion (6).

The context: CTC expansion

We identified policies that expand CTCs as a timely and compelling context for our initial tests of longer-form messages that highlight racial disparities. CTC policies are designed to help families manage the cost of raising children. Current US federal law offers a tax credit worth up to $2,000 per eligible child. A 2021 temporary CTC expansion increased the maximum credit amount to $3,600 for children under age 6 years and $3,000 for children aged 6–17 years, made all lower-income families eligible for the maximum credit amount, and delivered payments monthly (in contrast to an annual tax return) (6). The temporary expansion was highly effective, reducing child poverty rates to their lowest-ever recorded levels that year, from 9.7% in 2020 to 5.2% in 2021 (18). Declines in child poverty rates were largest for Black children (reduced from 16.9 to 8.1%) and Hispanic children (reduced from 14.7 to 8.4%) (19). The US Census Bureau estimated that 2.1 million children were lifted out of poverty because of CTC expansion alone (19). There is also evidence that CTC expansion reduced food insecurity (6), increased housing affordability (20), and increased the psychological well-being of low-income adults (21, 22).

Once the temporary CTC expansion expired, rates of child poverty quickly rose again with rates more than doubling from 5.2 to 12.4% in 2022 (23). The largest of these increases were among Black and Hispanic children. There is widespread, bipartisan support for reinstating CTC expansion at the federal level (24), but US senators have yet to pass legislation that would make these changes permanent. Meanwhile, many states have passed their own CTC expansion policies, and others are considering such policies (25). In summary, CTC expansion represents a social policy under active political debate that appeals across partisan groupings and has strong evidence of both universal and racial equity-enhancing impacts on social well-being. We thus considered CTC expansion an ideal policy context to test how messages that center racial inequality affect policy support and intentions to advocate among people of diverse racial and political identities.

Combining scholarly and practice-based messaging recommendations

While there is a substantial literature on the impact of messaging about racial equity, its social and structural determinants, and social policies to address inequities (7, 26, 27), a much larger body of work has examined how message frames—interpretive packages of messaging content that diagnose social problems, identify causes, invite moral- or value-based judgments, and suggest solutions—shape how people make sense of health and social issues (28, 29). In short, message framing theory and research underscores the importance of three message ingredients when communicating about social problems: a description of structural causes of the problems, a description of effective and actionable policy solutions, and the foregrounding of salient values/morals that invite audiences to care about the issue (30, 31).

A parallel body of work has emerged in the policy advocacy and community organizing sphere that shares some key emphases, such as foregrounding (or leading with) shared values when introducing social problems, but also offers additional guidance on messaging about social policies that advance racial equity. For instance, the Race-Class Narrative project (32, 33) and communication toolkits developed by groups like Opportunity Agenda (34) also emphasize the importance of overtly discussing race while being inclusive of all people and emphasizing unity in explicit calls for collective action.

We are unaware of any research that has unpacked whether some or all the scholarly or practice-based messaging ingredients are necessary or sufficient for effective communication in support of social policy among racially and politically diverse audiences. We thus combined insights from both scholarly literature and practice-based literature to test whether specific ingredients are consequential among diverse audiences.

Universalist and targeted universalist appeals

One major focus of the current study compares universalist appeals (which do not explicitly discuss racial disparities in childhood poverty or CTC expansion impacts) and targeted universalist appeals (which add information about racial disparities and disproportionately large impacts on specific racial and ethnic groups) (35–37). There is a surprisingly small literature on the impact of race-based message targeting in health and political contexts (38–45), though a few recent studies have questioned the value of race-based targeting in shifting political or policy attitudes due to limited impact on members of the targeted racial group and potential for backlash among members of the nontargeted racial group (40–42). These studies tested racial targeting in the form of explicit appeals to a single racial group (e.g. pledges to represent interests of Latinos, 40; ads using Spanish to appeal to Hispanic voters, 41, 42). The use of a targeted universalist strategy, however, has potential to circumvent the challenges of single-race message targeting because it describes benefits to all racial groups while also emphasizing disproportionately large benefits to historically minoritized racial groups. As such, the targeted universalist strategy could appeal to historically minoritized populations (given the emphasis on large benefits to them) while also appealing to White people (given the universal benefit of the policy). This would be consistent with other recent work

finding that White Americans were supportive of race-conscious policies when they were framed as benefitting them (43).

Study overview and hypotheses

To limit the number of conditions, we held some ingredients constant. All conditions included a *call to collective action* that referenced the need for unity, and all intervention conditions included a description of childhood poverty that *led with the shared value* of equal opportunity. We then tested the extent to which adding other recommended message ingredients influenced policy support and intentions to advocate for CTC expansion among Black, Hispanic, and White people. Three intervention messages included no mention of race or ethnicity and, as such, represented *universalist* appeals. These messages included the value-led description of childhood poverty on its own or with additional information about either the effectiveness of CTC expansion policy (*policy efficacy*) or *structural causes* of poverty. Three *targeted universalist* appeals supplemented the *universalist* appeal with information highlighting the greater prevalence and impact of childhood poverty, the greater impact of CTC expansion, and structural causes of poverty specifically for Black and Hispanic people (e.g. "*The temporary child tax credit expansion in 2021 was highly effective in reducing child poverty* [...but its effects were even larger for Black and Hispanic children.]").

We conducted two randomized message trials, study 1 using Prolific's nonprobability panel (*n* = 1,402 after 120 case exclusions) and study 2 using SSRS's Opinion Panel, a web-based probability sample of US adults (*n* = 4,483 after 66 case exclusions). Each study included comparably sized subsamples of Black, Hispanic, and White respondents (S2 provides details about recruitment, case exclusions, and sample characteristics). Study 1 was exploratory and compared six messages, using a 2 (*universalist* or *targeted universalist* appeal) by 3 (value-led problem description [VLPD] only; VLPD+ structural causes; or VLPD+ policy efficacy) factorial design, to a control message that simply described the policy and called for collective action. This study was small and designed to identify the most promising message strategies for larger-scale replication (44). Study 2 was limited to the most promising message design with which to further examine the *universalist* and *targeted universalist* appeals (VLPD+ policy efficacy). Informed by the results of study 1, study 2 had three preregistered hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: Compared with a *control* condition, the *universalist* appeal condition will produce higher levels of (i) support for policies to reduce child poverty and (ii) intentions to pursue advocacy-related informational or interpersonal behaviors among White respondents.
- Hypothesis 2: Compared with the *control* condition, the *targeted universalist* appeal will produce higher levels of (i) support for policies to reduce child poverty and (ii) intentions to pursue advocacy-related informational or interpersonal behaviors among Black and Hispanic respondents.
- Hypothesis 3: Compared with the *control* condition, the *targeted* universalism condition will NOT produce lower (i) support for policies to reduce child poverty and (ii) intentions to pursue advocacy-related informational or interpersonal behaviors among White respondents.

Results

Summary of findings from study 1

Supplementary Table S1a presents mean values for policy support and three measures of advocacy intentions within each randomized condition and each group of Black, Hispanic, and White (non-Black, non-Hispanic) respondents.

The *targeted universalist* appeal + policy efficacy information produced higher levels of policy support than the *control* among Black and Hispanic respondents (Cohen's d_{Black} = 0.59, $P < 0.001$; Cohen's $d_{Hispanic}$ = 0.53, $P < 0.003$) and higher intentions to pursue advocacy-related informational or interpersonal behaviors among Black respondents (Cohen's d = 0.33, $P = 0.039$). Effect sizes for this appeal were larger than all other conditions for policy support and informational/interpersonal advocacy intentions among Black and Hispanic respondents. Among these groups, this appeal also had either the highest (among Hispanic respondents) or second highest (among Black respondents) effect sizes for overall advocacy intentions.

Among White respondents, each intervention message produced higher mean values than the control on policy support and each index of advocacy intentions. In most cases, effects were not statistically significant, though the *targeted universalist* appeal without structural causes or policy efficacy tended to have the largest effect sizes (and in most cases $P < 0.05$).

Across all three groups, adding structural cause information to either *universalist* or *targeted universalist* appeals produced no effect on policy support and advocacy intentions and, among Black and Hispanic respondents, mean values were often lower than *control*.

Given that the strongest pattern of effects was observed for the *targeted universalist* appeal + policy efficacy information among Black and Hispanic respondents, we decided to focus the replication study (study 2) on comparing the effects of the *targeted universalism* + policy efficacy condition and the *universalism* + policy efficacy condition with the *control* condition. While the *universalist* appeal + policy efficacy did not have the highest means or effect sizes among White respondents, this condition produced higher means than the *targeted universalist* appeal + policy efficacy for all outcomes among White respondents (though not at statistically significant levels). We thus chose to compare *universalism* + policy efficacy to *targeted universalism* + policy efficacy because it provided the cleanest, direct test of *targeted universalism* versus *universalism* (holding the addition of policy efficacy constant).

Tests of preregistered hypotheses from study 2

Table 1 shows mean values for policy support and the same three versions of advocacy intentions within each randomized condition, presented separately for Black, Hispanic, and White respondents. Cells that present data pertaining to preregistered hypotheses are shaded. We summarize those first before moving to a broader set of analyses summarizing overall patterns. We did not use analytic weights for the analysis since we are not seeking to produce nationally representative point estimates and used random assignment to permit causal inference across and within racial/ethnic groups.

Partially supporting Hypothesis 1, among White respondents, the *universalist* appeal produced higher levels of support for policies reducing child poverty than the control appeal (Cohen's d = 0.16, $P = 0.007$), but not higher intentions to pursue advocacy-related informational or interpersonal behaviors (Cohen's d = 0.00, $P = 0.495$).

Supporting Hypothesis 2, among Black and Hispanic respondents, the *targeted universalist* appeal produced higher levels of both support for policies reducing child poverty (Cohen's d_{Black} = 0.19, $P < 0.001$; Cohen's $d_{Hispanic}$ = 0.21, $P < 0.001$) and intentions to pursue advocacy-related informational or interpersonal

Table 1. Means by randomized condition and racial/ethnic identity, study 2 (preregistered hypotheses shaded).

Condition	Black respondents		Hispanic respondents		White respondents	
	Mean (95% CI)	Effect size vs control (P)	Mean (95% CI)	Effect size vs control (P)	Mean (95% CI)	Effect size vs control (P)
Policy support						
Control group	4.15 (4.09–4.21)		3.83 (3.76–3.90)		3.78 (3.70–3.86)	
Universal + efficacy	4.27 (4.21–4.32)	0.19 (0.002)	3.99 (3.92–4.06)	0.21 (<0.001)	3.92 (3.84–3.99)	0.16 (0.007)
Targeted + efficacy	4.27 (4.22–4.33)	0.19 (0.001)	3.99 (3.93–4.06)	0.21 (<0.001)	3.84 (3.75–3.92)	0.07 (0.161)
Advocacy intention (informational and interpersonal)						
Control group	3.49 (3.41–3.58)		3.25 (3.16–3.35)		2.95 (2.85–3.05)	
Universal + efficacy	3.67 (3.59–3.75)	0.19 (0.002)	3.42 (3.33–3.52)	0.17 (0.005)	2.95 (2.85–3.05)	0.00 (0.495)
Targeted + efficacy	3.72 (3.64–3.80)	0.25 (<0.001)	3.35 (3.26–3.44)	0.10 (0.068)	2.94 (2.84–3.04)	−0.01 (0.452)
Advocacy intention (institutional)						
Control group	2.86 (2.76–2.95)		2.56 (2.47–2.65)		2.18 (2.09–2.27)	
Universal + efficacy	3.09 (3.00–3.18)	0.23 (<0.001)	2.74 (2.65–2.84)	0.18 (0.003)	2.19 (2.11–2.28)	0.02 (0.395)
Targeted + efficacy	3.14 (3.05–3.22)	0.28 (<0.001)	2.67 (2.58–2.76)	0.11 (0.045)	2.24 (2.15–2.33)	0.07 (0.153)
Advocacy intention (overall—informational, interpersonal, and institutional)						
Control group	3.14 (3.06–3.23)		2.88 (2.79–2.96)		2.53 (2.44–2.62)	
Universal + efficacy	3.35 (3.27–3.43)	0.23 (<0.001)	3.05 (2.96–3.14)	0.19 (0.002)	2.54 (2.45–2.62)	0.01 (0.446)
Targeted + efficacy	3.40 (3.32–3.48)	0.28 (<0.001)	2.98 (2.90–3.07)	0.12 (0.041)	2.56 (2.47–2.65)	0.04 (0.298)

For each outcome, independent samples t tests within each racial/ethnic group compared one intervention condition with the control group. Effect size estimates are Cohen's *d*.
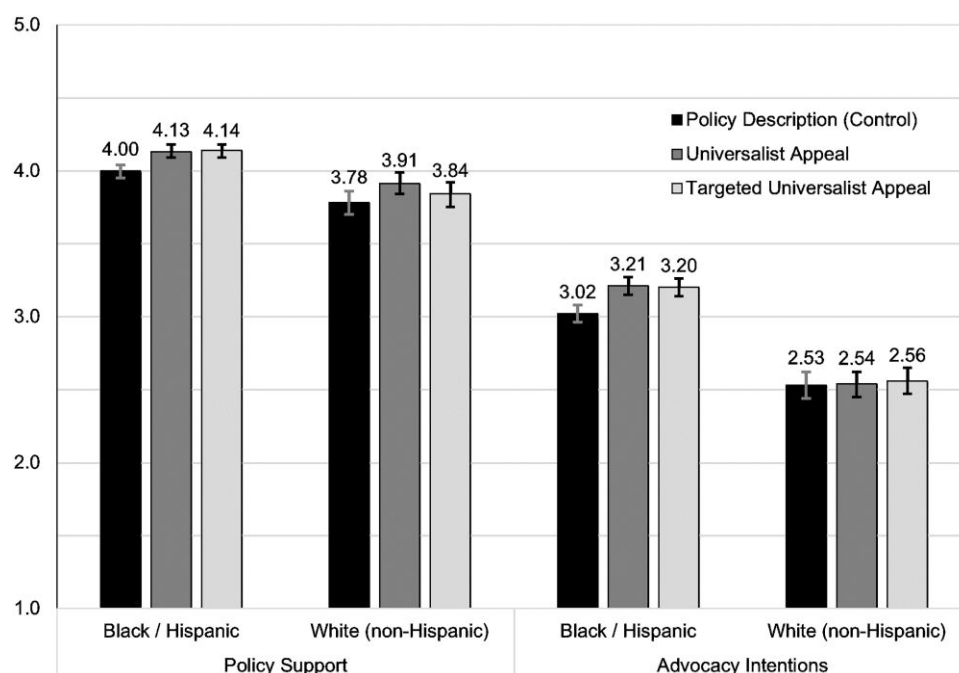
Fig. 1. Policy support and advocacy intentions by randomized condition and racial/ethnic identity, study 2.

behaviors, though with a $P > 0.05$ among Hispanic respondents (Cohen's $d_{Black} = 0.25$, $P < 0.001$; Cohen's $d_{Hispanic} = 0.10$, $P = 0.068$).

To test Hypothesis 3, we conducted noninferiority tests. We preregistered Cohen's d of 0.20 (for a small effect size) and a SD of 1 for the outcome variable (based on study 1 findings). Accordingly, if the lower bound of the 95% CI for the effect of the *targeted universalist* message (versus *control*) was greater than −0.20, then we would conclude that the *targeted universalist* message had NOT produced a negative impact. The lower bounds of the 95% CIs for the effects on policy support [−0.06, 0.18] and intentions to pursue advocacy-related informational or interpersonal behaviors [−0.15, 0.13] were both higher than −0.20 thus supporting Hypothesis 3. Among White respondents, the *targeted universalist* appeal did not produce lower support for policies reducing child poverty or lower intentions to pursue advocacy-

related informational or interpersonal behaviors relative to the *control*.

Overall patterns of message effects from study 2

In contrast to study 1, the pattern of effect sizes for intentions to engage in informational, interpersonal, and institutional advocacy behaviors was very similar, as was the pattern of effects for Black and Hispanic respondents (though patterns were different among White respondents). Consequently, we combined the advocacy items into a single advocacy intentions index and combined Black and Hispanic respondents into a single analytic group for the next set of analyses.

Figure 1 provides mean values and 95% CIs for policy support and advocacy intentions stratified by randomized condition and

Table 2. Means by randomized conditions and formal tests for interactions between message conditions and racial/ethnic identity and between message conditions and partisanship, study 2.

Condition	Overall sample[a]		Condition × racial/ethnic identity interactions[b]	Condition × partisanship interactions (2-Party + leaning)[a,b]
	Mean (95% CI)	Effect size vs control (P)	reference category: control condition, black respondents	reference category: control condition, Democrats + lean Democrat
Policy support				
Control group	3.92 (3.88–3.96)			
Universal + efficacy	4.06 (4.03–4.10)	0.19 (<0.001)	$\beta_{\text{univ*White}} = 0.01$, $t(2,788) = 0.24$, $P = 0.812$ $\beta_{\text{univ*Hisp}} = 0.02$, $t(2,788) = 0.58$, $P = 0.563$ $R^2_{\text{change}} = 0.00$, $F(2, 788) = 0.17$, $P = 0.845$	$\beta_{\text{univ*repub}} = 0.04$, $t(2,972) = 1.33$, $P = 0.185$ $R^2_{\text{change}} = 0.00$, $F(1, 2,972) = 1.76$, $P = 0.185$
Targeted + efficacy	4.04 (4.00–4.08)	0.15 (<0.001)	$\beta_{\text{t.univ*White}} = -0.03$, $t(2,794) = -0.91$, $P = 0.366$ $\beta_{\text{t.univ*Hisp}} = 0.02$, $t(2,794) = 0.59$, $P = 0.555$ $R^2_{\text{change}} = 0.00$, $F(2, 794) = 1.07$, $P = 0.342$	$\beta_{\text{t.univ*repub}} = 0.04$, $t(2,975) = 1.58$, $P = 0.115$ $R^2_{\text{change}} = 0.00$, $F(1, 2,975) = 2.49$, $P = 0.115$
Advocacy intention				
Control group	2.86 (2.81–2.91)			
Universal + efficacy	3.01 (2.96–3.06)	0.16 (<0.001)	$\beta_{\text{univ*White}} = -0.08$, $t(2,788) = -2.33$, $P = 0.020$ $\beta_{\text{univ*Hisp}} = -0.01$, $t(2,788) = -0.37$, $P = 0.711$ $R^2_{\text{change}} = 0.00$, $F(2, 788) = 3.05$, $P = 0.048$	$\beta_{\text{univ*repub}} = -0.05$, $t(2,972) = -1.75$, $P = 0.080$ $R^2_{\text{change}} = 0.00$, $F(1, 2,972) = 3.07$, $P = 0.080$
Targeted + efficacy	3.01 (2.96–3.06)	0.16 (<0.001)	$\beta_{\text{t.univ*White}} = -0.08$, $t(2,794) = -2.61$, $P = 0.009$ $\beta_{\text{t.univ*Hisp}} = -0.06$, $t(2,794) = -1.80$, $P = 0.072$ $R^2_{\text{change}} = 0.00$, $F(2, 794) = 3.61$, $P = 0.027$	$\beta_{\text{t.univ*repub}} = -0.06$, $t(2,975) = -2.03$, $P = 0.043$ $R^2_{\text{change}} = 0.00$, $F(1, 2,975) = 4.11$, $P = 0.043$
Policy efficacy				
Control group	3.19 (3.13–3.24)			
Universal + efficacy	3.46 (3.41–3.52)	0.26 (<0.001)	$\beta_{\text{univ*White}} = -0.03$, $t(2,787) = -0.78$, $P = 0.437$ $\beta_{\text{univ*Hisp}} = 0.01$, $t(2,787) = 0.41$, $P = 0.680$ $R^2_{\text{change}} = 0.00$, $F(2, 787) = 0.69$, $P = 0.500$	$\beta_{\text{univ*repub}} = -0.03$, $t(2,972) = -1.13$, $P = 0.259$ $R^2_{\text{change}} = 0.00$, $F(1, 2,972) = 1.28$, $P = 0.259$
Targeted + efficacy	3.44 (3.38–3.50)	0.23 (<0.001)	$\beta_{\text{t.univ*White}} = 0.01$, $t(2,793) = 0.38$, $P = 0.706$ $\beta_{\text{t.univ*Hisp}} = -0.01$, $t(2,793) = -0.38$, $P = 0.701$ $R^2_{\text{change}} = 0.00$, $F(2, 793) = 0.27$, $P = 0.760$	$\beta_{\text{t.univ*repub}} = 0.02$, $t(2,975) = 0.69$, $P = 0.490$ $R^2_{\text{change}} = 0.00$, $F(1, 2,975) = 0.49$, $P = 0.490$

[a]Overall Sample column: for each outcome, independent samples t tests compared one intervention condition with the control group; effect size estimates are Cohen's *d*.
[b]Interaction analyses: Regressors were entered in two blocks: (i) indicators for condition and (race/ethnicity or partisanship depending on the table column) and (ii) indicators for condition, (race/ethnicity or partisanship), and their interaction terms. R^2_{change} refers to the second block where the interaction terms were introduced.

racial/ethnic group. Among Black/Hispanic respondents, both the *universalist* and *targeted universalist* appeals produced equivalently greater policy support and advocacy intentions than the *control* (M_{diffs}: policy support, $0.13_{\text{Universalist}}$ and 0.14_{Targeted}; advocacy intentions, $0.19_{\text{Universalist}}$ and 0.18_{Targeted}). Among White respondents, only the *universalist* appeal produced significantly greater policy support than the *control* ($M_{\text{diffs}} = 0.13$), though the *targeted universalist* appeal did not reduce support. Neither treatment produced a difference in advocacy intentions among White respondents. Across conditions, policy support was slightly higher among Black/Hispanic respondents than among White respondents (0.22 to 0.30 scale points), while advocacy intentions were substantially higher among Black/Hispanic respondents than White respondents (0.49 to 0.67 scale points).

Effect moderation by race/ethnicity and partisanship from study 2

Table 2 shows mean values for the overall sample and includes formal tests of effect moderation by racial/ethnic identity (comparing White and Hispanic to Black respondents as the omitted reference group) and political partisanship (comparing Republicans or Republican leaners to Democrats or Democratic leaners). Analyses with and without demographic controls produced substantively equivalent results for racial/ethnic identity and partisanship. For simplicity, we report results without controls. Results for party affiliation were also substantively equivalent when including or excluding leaners, so we report results that include leaners to maximize sample size (Table S1b provides results without leaners).

Overall, both *universalist* and *targeted universalist* appeals produced higher policy support (Cohen's *d*s = 0.19 and 0.15, respectively; *P*s < 0.001) and advocacy intentions (Cohen's *d*s = 0.16, *P*s < 0.001) than the *control*. However, effects on advocacy intentions were driven by Black/Hispanic respondents. There was a statistically significant interaction between race/ethnicity and appeal, such that both the *universalist* (R^2 change $P = 0.048$) and *targeted universalist* (R^2 change $P = 0.027$) appeals were significantly less effective among White compared with Black respondents. This confirms the pattern of results observed in Figure 1, which showed significant effects among Black/Hispanic respondents on advocacy intentions but no such effects among White respondents. Additionally, the *targeted universalist* appeal was significantly less effective among Republicans/leaners than among Democrats/leaners (R^2 change $P = 0.043$).

Figure 2 provides mean values and 95% CIs for policy support and advocacy intentions stratified by randomized condition and partisanship. This figure confirms the pattern of effect moderation by partisanship for advocacy intentions but not policy support. Both treatment messages had positive effects of comparable magnitude on policy support among both Democrats/leaners and Republicans/ leaners, but effects on advocacy intentions were only apparent among Democrats/leaners.

Policy efficacy as a potential mechanistic variable in study 2

Finally, since policy efficacy information was a key component of the treatment messages, we explored whether there were observed differences between the treatment and control messages
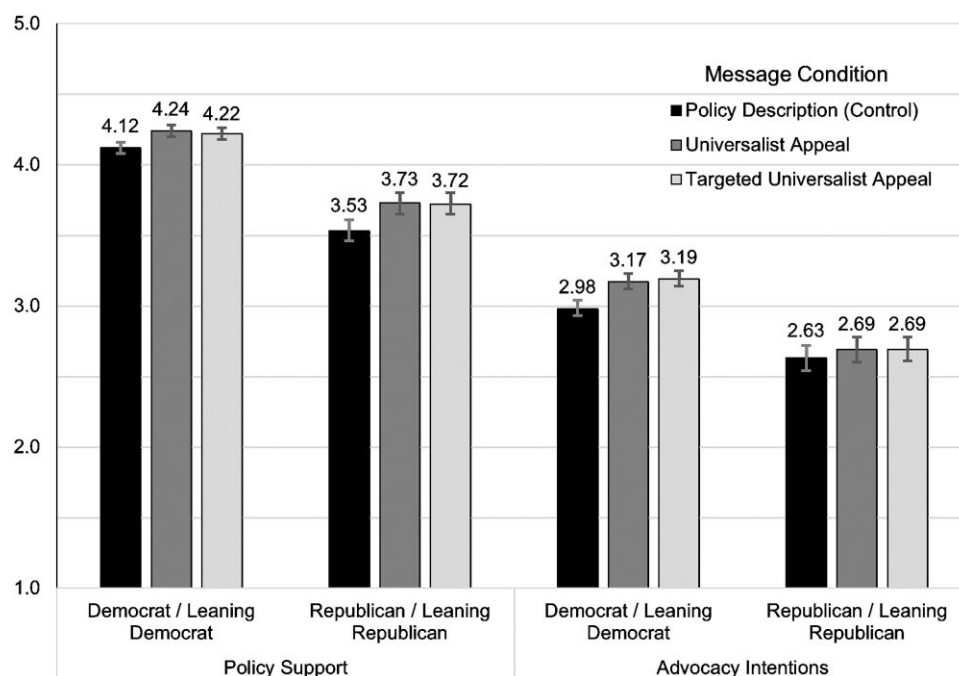
Fig. 2. Policy support and advocacy intentions by randomized condition and partisanship, study 2.

in terms of perceived policy efficacy. The bottom rows of Table 2 show that both the *universalist* (Cohen's $d = 0.26$, $P < 0.001$) and *targeted universalist* appeal (Cohen's $d = 0.23$, $P < 0.001$) produced higher levels of perceived policy efficacy than the *control* overall, and none of the interactions with racial/ethnic identity or partisanship were statistically significant for this outcome. There were no differences in the effect magnitude for the *universalist* versus the *targeted universalist* appeal.

Discussion

We draw four primary conclusions from these initial studies. First, we show that increasing US public support for an evidence-based redistributive policy across racial/ethnic and partisan lines is possible with well-designed and pretested message strategies that center shared values, describe policy efficacy, and include a call to collective action (30–34). While recent efforts to reinstate CTC expansion have bipartisan legislative support in the US House of Representatives (24), this has not translated into policy passage, leaving many states to fill the void (25). We show that relatively short, strategic messaging can move the needle toward greater public support.

Second, we find that universalist and targeted universalist appeals resonate similarly among Black, Hispanic, and Democrat/Democratic-leaning audiences. While we reasoned that messages that explicitly describe the equity-enhancing impact of CTC expansion might be particularly resonant among Black and Hispanic respondents, we did not find any evidence that the targeted universalist appeal was any more persuasive or motivating than the universalist appeal among these groups. This finding is consistent with some recent work that has questioned the unique impact of race-based targeting in political contexts (40), though there remains much to learn about the relative benefits of targeted universalist approaches.

Third, while the universalist appeal was the only treatment message to significantly increase policy support among White respondents, the targeted universalist appeal (which explicitly centered race and racial equity-enhancing policy effects within the policy's more universal benefits) did not reduce support for CTC expansion among this group. This is noteworthy considering previously expressed concerns that centering discussions of race in the context of policy advocacy runs the risk of alienating White or Republican audiences (8–11). While this condition did not maximize support among White respondents, it did not backfire either, and it appeared to resonate equally among Republican and Democratic audiences in promoting policy support. These findings are consistent with other recent studies which find no evidence of backlash to explicit centering of race in messages about social policy (15, 45, 46). Prior research further suggests that failure to discuss equity-enhancing outcomes of policy may contribute to broad misperceptions that race and racism are unrelated to social problems like poverty, which can distort ideas about whether equitable policy is necessary in the first place (47).

Fourth, message effects on advocacy intentions were only apparent among Black and Hispanic respondents, not among White respondents. This is noteworthy because much of the prior scholarly work on messaging to advance redistributive or racial equity-enhancing policies has centered perspectives from White audiences (7) and has focused on policy support rather than political advocacy or mobilization as outcomes (7, 17). The fact that effects on advocacy intentions were only apparent in study 2 among Black and Hispanic respondents reaffirms the need to recruit meaningfully sized samples of Black and Hispanic respondents in this type of work. It is possible that prior work that has relied on exclusively White respondents or national samples without purposeful oversampling of Black or Hispanic people may have missed potential effects on advocacy and mobilization outcomes that can shape political processes.

Limitations, implications, and future work

We acknowledge that message testing in a single context raises questions about generalizability to other policies and populations. The context of CTC expansion is one with many attributes that lend themselves to favorable responses. While redistributive,

CTC expansion likely enjoys bipartisan support because it can be framed as a tax cut among Republicans and a social welfare intervention among Democrats. Temporary CTC expansion also had strong effects across racial groups while providing disproportionate benefit to Black and Hispanic children; not all equity-enhancing policies have both universal and targeted effects. The effects of overtly messaging about racial inequities and racial equity-enhancing policy impact may differ in more politically divisive policy contexts or for policies that involve tradeoffs between universal and targeted impacts. Effect sizes in study 2 were relatively small and reflect the impact of a single message exposure with immediate follow-up assessment at a single point in time. Whether effects persist over time, with or without repeated message exposures, remains a question for future work. That said, the current pair of studies offer a strong and replicable test of the causal impact of theoretical constructs (universalist and targeted universalist approaches) in the context of a social policy with evidence of substantial impact. We chose CTC expansion as policy under active political debate and demonstrate that under some conditions, messaging that centers racial equity can persuade across the political spectrum and does not inherently demobilize or evoke backlash among White or Republican audiences.

The evidence here underscores the value in considering both scholarly and practice-based messaging recommendations in testing the impact of strategic communication. While we cannot disentangle whether value-framing, focus on collective action, emphasis on policy efficacy, or another message ingredient held constant across conditions were necessary or sufficient in shifting outcomes, we suspect that a combination of these factors played a role in shaping the impact of these messages. That said, results from study 1 suggest explicit discussion of structural causes of poverty are not a key factor in this strategic context. Future work should continue to integrate practice- and scholarly evidence-based knowledge into message testing studies and consider designs that allow for further unpacking of which message ingredients may be influential in various strategic contexts.

This work also underscores the value of centering perspectives from historically minoritized populations in policy communication research. The use of large and racially/ethnically diverse samples allowed us to detect effects on outcomes that would not have been apparent among a predominantly White sample and revealed that both universalist and targeted universalist appeals had similar effects among Black and Hispanic respondents. Importantly, people with shared racial identities are not monolithic groups, and there may be intersectional identities or subgroups of respondents for whom one message is more persuasive or motivating than another. Additional analyses should further explore these possibilities, which would require large samples of people from traditionally overlooked populations to understand the extent to which messages resonate across people with diverse and intersectional identities. Failure to do so runs the risk of reinforcing longstanding racial injustice, erasing crucial voices in scholarly research and policy analysis, and missing critical insights into message effects and human behavior.

Materials and Methods

Additional study information and materials (sample demographics, message stimuli, measures, and instruments) are given in Supplementary Information. Both studies were preregistered with osf.io (study 1, study 2). Both studies were reviewed and approved by Cornell University's Institutional Review Board under protocol # IRB0147767. All respondents provided informed consent prior to participation.

Sample characteristics
Study 1
The analytical sample for study 1 includes 1,402 US adults recruited through the Prolific online platform (www.prolific.com) from 2023 August 17 to 21 (680 women, 680 men, 36 transgender/nonbinary/another identity; $M_{age} = 37.0$ years [$SD = 12.3$]): 436 Black (non-Hispanic, non-White), 450 Hispanic (non-Black), and 480 White (non-Black, non-Hispanic).

Study 2
The analytical sample for study 2 includes 4,483 US adults recruited from the *SSRS Opinion Panel*, a nationally representative probability-based web panel, from 2023 November 28 to December 12 (2,653 women, 1,793 men, 25 transgender/nonbinary/another identity, 12 declined or missing data; $M_{age} = 45.2$ years [$SD = 16.3$]): 1,501 Black (non-Hispanic, non-White), 1,377 Hispanic (non-Black), 1,312 White (non-Black, non-Hispanic), and 293 who identified as multiple or neither of the three focus racial/ethnic identities. S2 provides additional sample characteristics and case exclusions.

Message stimuli
Messages in both studies were presented to respondents with each message ingredient (e.g. policy efficacy information, call to action, etc.) on a separate page and a button respondents clicked to advance to the next page. To maximize the ecological validity of the studies, message development was informed by publicly available messages and information about child poverty and related topics, including Race-Class Narrative messaging guides (32, 33). Sources included messages from advocacy/nonprofit organizations, news stories from national media outlets, and reports from research institutions and government agencies (S3 provides the complete messages for each condition of both studies and links to source materials).

Measures
Immediately after exposure to message stimuli, respondents in both studies responded to questions about their attitudes toward government efforts to reduce child poverty, intentions to advocate in support of expanding the CTC, beliefs about the policy's effectiveness, and a variety of other items not reported here. Respondents then provided demographic information about themselves (S4 provides wordings, descriptives, and psychometrics for the items reported here, and S5 provides the complete instrument presented to respondents). Below we describe measures analyzed herein.

Policy support
Three items adapted from prior research (48) asked respondents: *Do you think it is a good or bad idea for your state to expand the child tax credit?* (1 = A very bad idea, 3 = Neutral, 5 = A very good idea), *How much effort would you like your state to devote to solving the problem of child poverty?* (1 = None at all, 3 = Some; 5 = A great deal), and *Do you think your state spends too much or too little on programs to end child poverty, or is the level of spending about right?* (1 = Far too little, 3 = About right, 5 = Far too much; reverse-coded). Three additional items asked for their stance on aspects of CTC expansion under consideration at the time (*Increase the amount of child tax credit given to people with income below a certain level; Make the child tax credit available to families with little or no income so that poor people can receive*

credit even if it exceeds the amount of taxes they owe; Make child tax credit payments to families on a monthly basis instead of once a year at tax time) (49) (1 = *Strongly oppose*, 3 = *Neither oppose nor support*, 5 = *Strongly support*). We analyzed a single averaged composite score for these six items.

Advocacy intentions

For 12 advocacy-related behaviors adapted from prior research to reference CTC expansion (50–52), respondents were asked, *How likely are you to do the following in the next 12 months?* Six were informational and interpersonal behaviors (e.g. sign a petition, raise awareness among people you know), and six were behaviors occurring in institutional and organizational contexts (e.g. volunteer time to a campaign, join an organization) (1 = *Extremely unlikely*, 3 = *Neither unlikely nor likely*, 5 = *Extremely likely*). We analyzed an averaged composite score for each of the 6-item groups and a single 12-item composite.

Perceived policy efficacy

Ten items adapted from prior research (53) asked respondents, *How effective do you think expanding the child tax credit would be for…* impacting five factors related to childhood wellness (reducing poverty, hunger, homelessness; improving health, education) and *Reducing racial disparities in…* those five outcomes (1 = *Not at all effective*, 3 = *Somewhat effective*, 5 = *Very effective*). We analyzed a single composite score for all 10 items.

Race/ethnicity

Respondents were asked, *How do you describe your race?* (multiple-selection checkboxes). They also indicated whether they were *of Hispanic, Latino/a/x, or Spanish origin (Yes/No)*. To create mutually exclusive categories for the groups of interest, we constructed a race/ethnicity indicator to differentiate respondents who were Black (non-Hispanic, non-White), Hispanic (non-Black), and White (non-Hispanic, non-Black).

Political party

We asked respondents whether *Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a… (Republican, Democrat, Independent, Another party, No preference)?* Those who indicated anything other than Republican or Democrat were asked, *If you had to choose, do you think of yourself as closer to the… (Republican Party, Democratic Party)* (54). There were no differences in party identification (including both partisans and partisans + leaners) between randomized conditions.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material is available at *PNAS Nexus* online.

Author Contributions

J.N., N.P., J.L., J.M., E.F.F., R.H.N., T.T., C.L.B., N.A.L.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; J.N., N.P., J.L.: Investigation, formal analysis; J.N., N.P.: Writing – original draft.

Data Availability

Complete study materials, data, and analysis code are available through the Open Science Framework (55).

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