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When “Tried and True” Advocacy Strategies Backfire: Narrative Messages Can Undermine State Legislator Support for Early Childcare Policies

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Abstract

A core principle of policy advocacy is that to engage decision makers in the urgency, complexity, and controversy of problems, advocates must effectively tell the story of those issues. Policy stories, or narratives, paint mental pictures of what a problem is, who is affected, and how it came to be. Yet, the persuasive effects of narratives on one key group, state legislators, remain understudied. Drawing from the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), media advocacy, and public interest communications, we sought to inform advocacy strategy by illuminating state legislators’ responses to messages about public investments in quality childcare for all. Contrary to expectations, we found that narratives can have unintended effects challenging or even diminishing legislator support. We discuss implications for advocacy strategy.

Introduction

Early childhood care and education in the United States has added an acute crisis to what previously had been a chronic crisis (Biden, 2021). Providers of these essential services—overwhelmingly women and often persons of color—already were struggling under the prepandemic weight of high demand and insufficient pay and benefits as well as inadequate working conditions, limited educational tools and resources, and need for professional credentialing and ongoing training (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

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The recent experience of COVID-19 and the lockdowns, physical spacing, and reduced capacity orders that were required to contain it have left many providers in jeopardy if not forced them to close altogether. Meanwhile, families across the country are faced with difficult, if not impossible, decisions between remaining in the workforce and providing their own care and education for their youngest children while their providers are shuttered. And, although federal attention has turned to the need to offer financial support to see families and providers through the childcare emergency the pandemic has wrought, others have cautioned that this alone will not be sufficient: state and other policy makers also will need to address the sources of instability in access and provision of early childhood care and education that existed prior (Bassok et al., 2021; Child Care & Early Education Research Connections, 2020). As such, while the nation looks to a return to life with greater public mobility and the reopening of community resources such as early care centers,¹ it is instructive to know how state policymakers thought about early childcare and education before the pandemic, as this backdrop forms the foundation onto which the subsequent effects of COVID-19 overlaid. Our research explored state lawmaker reactions to advocacy messages encouraging state-level early care and education policy supports in the prepandemic months of late 2019.

A core principle of public policy advocacy is that to engage audiences—including policymakers—in the urgency, complexity, and controversy of the societal problems we face, advocates must effectively tell the story of those issues (Ganz, 2011; Ryan, 1991; Stone, 2002; Wallack et al., 1993). Policy stories, or “narratives,”² paint a mental picture of what a problem is, who is affected, and how it came to be. Furthermore, policy stories explain why the issue is important and deserves our immediate attention, who and what must be mobilized to resolve it, and present potential solutions to be considered. Quite simply, narratives provide “mental models” of complex or abstract issues for audiences to assess (Bower & Morrow, 1990, p. 44). As such, narratives can serve a key function within a comprehensive policy advocacy strategy (Dorfman et al., 2005).

Numerous resources and tools have been prepared to support policy advocates in constructing compelling and effective narratives about the issues they address (e.g., Berkeley Media Studies Group et al., 2018; Frameworks Institute, 2020; Opportunity Agenda, 2019). Although advocates, funders, and public interest communicators strongly recommend narrative as a core strategy (e.g., American Public Health Association, n.d.; Grant, 2019; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2018), the effects of policy narratives among one key audience—state legislators—remain understudied. In particular, it is not clear whether narrative

¹ The final draft of this paper was prepared in early spring, 2021.

² We recognize that some distinguish between a broader form of narrative, meaning an overarching metanarrative, or societal-level set of issue portrayals that blend into a predominant set of perspectives and understandings (e.g., Roe 1994), and a single story, or a unique portrayal of an issue involving characters, setting, plot, and moral. For purposes of this paper, we refer interchangeably to a single policy narrative or story to reflect the specific issue portraits advocates and others use to convey specific examples of how social issues affect people and what proposed solutions may have to offer. This use of the term is also consistent with conceptual definitions employed in fields of communication, social psychology, and political science/policy studies all informing this work (see Braddock & Dillard, 2016; Green & Brock, 2002; Jones & McBeth, 2010).

appeals resonate along partisan lines, and further, what effects these messages might have on advocates' primary goal: state legislators' support for policy. Thus, our research explores how U.S. state legislators across the ideological spectrum respond to narrative appeals for policies supporting affordable, quality, early childcare for all, and whether those responses translate to shifts in support for related policies.³

Literature review

Narrative as advocacy strategy

Policy narratives are issue portrayals constructed of a setting (when, where, and under what conditions the problem takes place), characters (those affected and those responsible for cause and/or solution), plot (the contextual arc explaining relationships among story elements, key decision points and actions), and resolution (the critical takeaway(s) audiences should glean, notably including those surrounding the policy at issue) (e.g., Ganz, 2011; Jones & McBeth, 2010). Well-constructed narratives help audiences cognitively place evidence in context (Stone, 1989), understand and analyze the conditions in which problems occur and solutions may be possible (Iyengar, 1990; Lundell et al., 2013), think in more complex ways about the causes and solutions for social problems (Niederdeppe et al., 2014), and become absorbed into the narrative world at which time they are less likely to counterargue an underlying persuasive message (Green, 2006; Ratcliff & Sun, 2020). Narratives also emotively convey the situations portrayed so that we may better understand the situation and experiences of those affected—even if we may not have experienced those conditions ourselves (Igartua & Frutos, 2017; Oliver & Dillard, 2012).

Prior research demonstrates that narratives can engage audience members in support for a range of policies addressing the social determinants of health (Bandara et al., 2020; Niederdeppe et al., 2015). Notably, there is evidence that narratives can shift policy attitudes among both the general public (e.g., Bachhuber et al., 2015) and policymakers (e.g., Mosley & Gibson, 2017; Niederdeppe et al., 2016). More broadly, metaanalytic studies find that narratives are generally persuasive in shaping attitudes and beliefs among audiences (Braddock & Dillard, 2016) and enjoy a slight persuasive advantage (again on average) over nonnarrative messages in some messaging contexts (Shen et al., 2015).

Davidson (2017) chronicles a range of storytelling strategies and considerations employed by nongovernmental organizations, advocacy groups, and others working to engage decision makers in science-based policy. A key feature of these strategies is grounding policy narratives in one or more shared values. Values are the deeply held touchstones we use to determine

³ For ease of description, we refer to state legislators/ures throughout, although we recognize that the legislative bodies of American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands are territorial. Our labeling is in no way meant to diminish this fact.

whether and why something matters (Haidt, 2012; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Lakoff, 2001). As such, social activist and scholar, Marshall Ganz, explains that although data and evidence can answer the *How* question, narratives can answer the critical *Why* question and in so doing connect audiences to urgency and calls for immediate and specific action (Ganz, 2011). Quite simply, Ganz (2011) asserts, “Public narrative is a leadership practice of translating values into action” (p. 274).

Political scientists and policy scholars have observed that narratives are critical in legislative spaces and that the public policy dynamic is, at essence, a contest of narratives (Boswell, 2013; Stone, 2002). In this tradition and leading with the assertion that “narratives are the lifeblood of politics” (McBeth et al., 2007, p. 88), the architects of the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) provide a structure for understanding the mechanisms through which narratives exert their influence in the policy process (Jones & McBeth, 2010; Shanahan et al., 2017). According to NPF, this competition for meaning operates at and through interacting levels of the policy dynamic: the individual micro-level of policy actors’ attitudes, beliefs, intentions, affective response, and other cognitions; policy system meso-level involving the individuals, groups, coalitions, and organizations that exert pressure on powerholders to enact policy change; and societal macro-level including narratives that exist in institutions and cultures. Our research seeks to inform those advocates and others working to influence policy and policy systems at the meso-level by illuminating state legislators’ micro-level responses to narrative appeals.

It is in this context that we sought to explore the potential role of values-based narratives in advocacy for policies that help ensure affordable, accessible, quality childcare for all. Quality early childcare and education (henceforth “childcare”) for our youngest children, ages 0-5, has emerged as a critical social determinant of health (Chandra et al., 2016). Evidence indicates that quality early childcare benefits children (Anderson et al., 2003; Donoghue, 2017; Morrissey, 2019; Phillips et al., 2017), their parents (Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health, 2016; Morrissey, 2017), and their professional providers (Otten et al., 2019). Evidence also suggests that quality early childcare confers broader societal and economic benefits (Cannon et al., 2017; Heckman et al., 2010). Despite strong evidence for the value of these policies, however, access and affordability of quality early childcare in the United States remain significant problems for many—particularly those from groups already most systemically marginalized. As such, childcare is fundamentally a social and health equity issue (Braveman et al., 2018).

We seek to inform early childcare policy advocacy efforts grounded in media advocacy (Wallack et al., 1993; Winett & Wallack, 1996) and public interest communications (Christiano, 2017; Fessmann, 2017), each of which relies on narrative communication to engage decision-making audiences in specific public policy initiatives. Media advocacy specifies that primary targets of such efforts be the decisionmakers with the power to enact the policy solution, and that secondary audiences be those positioned to directly influence the primary targets (Wallack et al., 1999). Therefore, the primary targets in media advocacy campaigns—those whose attention is most sought and for whom core messages are crafted—tend to be narrowly circumscribed. Similarly, public interest communications indicates that although audiences can be large, they

also can be as narrowly cast as single powerholders, depending upon the campaign's overarching strategy and specific goals (Christiano & Niemand, 2017; Fessmann, 2017). A key challenge is that these important decision-making audiences are often hard to access—or reticent to participate in—the critical formative message research required of any well-developed campaign.

We focus on state legislators as decisions about policies that can render quality childcare more affordable and accessible to all families (e.g., tuition subsidies, provider incentives)—as well as those that can help ensure the quality of programming for children and increase the professional stature of providers (e.g., program metrics and standards; provider training and fair wages)—often are determined or facilitated at the state level (Karch, 2013). Moreover, unlike general public audiences, who are likely to consider these issues from the perspectives of familial need and decision making, state legislators must transactionally consider how the systems that support early childhood care and education could operate at a population level, including attendant tradeoffs, cost- or risk-benefit equations, and political implications (Stone, 2002). We thus considered U.S. state legislators a critical audience to assess. Specifically, we explore how this key and understudied audience responds to policy narratives, as compared to other forms of values-based argument, and whether and how these responses translate to policy support, policy beliefs, and intention to act on behalf of the proposal.

Contextualizing the current study

The research literature with a focus on values-based narrative messaging, early childhood care and education policy, and state legislator audiences is limited. It is not, however, entirely unexplored. One notable cluster of projects emerged around the early 2000s, an interval that (not coincidentally) also saw a resurgence of attention to early childhood care and education policy at both state and national levels (Karch, 2013). Although these studies now are older, they also are of important conceptual bearing for the current study. One such project, involving both public opinion work and key informant interviews with policy professionals who could speak to the interests and priorities of state legislators, recommended the use of messages that highlight the benefits of early care and education not only for children and families, but also for the functioning of broader society (Dorfman et al., 2004). This research further recommended developing rigorously contextual messages that clearly link current circumstances and potential benefits to the solutions presented, so that all associations are clear and dots connected for audiences.

Other work conducted in this same interval took the form of policy case studies that assessed early childcare and education messaging used in policy advocacy at state and local levels. These authors highlighted the importance of describing early childcare as both a professionalized industry and contributor to economic development. They found these portrayals effective both for generating public and community leader support and for distinguishing such services from welfare programming (Stoney, 2004; Warner et al., 2003). Proponents of the economic

development argument cautioned, however, that such benefits should only be described as secondary to the primary outcomes—advancement of children’s wellbeing and development—to ensure that public and decision-maker focus remains on the quality of programming for children, and not merely access to childcare placements that benefit working parents (Warner et al., 2003).

This concern also was reflected in a series of analyses and projects extending over a decade and conducted by a group of scholars and practitioners from the cognitive linguistics and framing arenas. They cautioned that focus on parental return to work can activate deeply entrenched perceptions of what they termed “child storage,” which requires only conditions of safety and security, and not quality programs that enhance social and cognitive development (Lakoff & Grady, 1998, p. 10; see also Gilliam & Bales, 2004). Indeed, even the term childcare, they cautioned, can invoke conceptually limiting images of “babysitting” and storage, rather than advancing images of enriching experiences that prepare children for school and life (Lakoff & Grady, 1998, p.14). At the same time, however, these authors acknowledged that messages must incorporate the economic realities that leave some families with no choice but to have parents in the workforce (Frameworks Institute, 2014; Lakoff & Grady, 1998). Thus, among these authors’ recommendations were that messages emphasize the benefits of quality programming for children’s social and cognitive development and highlight the broader socioeconomic outcomes that advantage everyone (Bales, 2008; Frameworks Institute, 2005). Indeed, these elements were found to resonate well with state legislators and legislative staff in focus groups and interviews (Frameworks Institute, 2005). These authors also recommended that messages emphasize the need to ensure trained and specialized professional early care and education providers (Lakoff & Grady, 1998) as well as highlight an equity frame emphasizing access to early childhood care for all, regardless of income (Gilliam & Bales, 2004).

This collected work informs our thinking about the current project although we recognize that, having been conducted more than a decade ago, political and social issues contexts may have shifted. Our own more recent work (Niederdeppe et al., in press) found that a highly contextual narrative structured around the value of equity (i.e., advancing policies that assure all families have what they need for wellbeing, irrespective of a community’s starting point) increased support for early childhood care policies among U.S. general public audiences relative to a control message. Important from an advocacy perspective, this narrative also was more effective than a simple propolicy advocacy message in generating support among audiences who were initially least likely to support such policies. Moreover, we found that these effects both transcended self-described political identity and extended spillover benefits by also increasing support for other child-facing policies (Niederdeppe et al., in press).

What these studies collectively suggest is that values-based communication involving elements of narrative have helped audiences connect to, and generate support for, early childcare policies. What we do not know is whether and which values-based narratives can help move key audiences on these issues today, and in particular whether messages structured around the value of *equity* can be persuasive. As such, we sought to examine to what extent narratives exert similar effects on elected partisan audiences—state legislators—who can be difficult to access

and thus who remain understudied. Specifically, we explored the effects on policy support of three different message types relative to a non-message control condition, beliefs about the pros and cons of the policy, and intention to advocate for early childcare initiatives. The messages explored were a values-based *narrative* involving specific characters in their context, a plot (problem portrait and key decision points), and resolution (policy outcome); a simple *propolicy message* involving problem description and policy benefits but lacking identifiable characters and their story arc; and a combination of *abridged narrative* (including all story components) with *simple propolicy message*. We explored all three message conditions because each is a strategy used by advocates in policy settings. Consistent with the policies presented and prior research described above, all messages were structured around the value of *equity*, emphasizing the importance of all families having access to the affordable, quality childcare options they need, irrespective of who they are and where they live.⁴ Based on these research foundations, we hypothesized:

Hypothesis 1 (Preregistered⁵, PH1): Messages that include the narrative will outperform the control group in promoting policy support and advocacy intentions (i.e., the narrative policy appeal will outperform the no-message control condition in promoting early childcare policy support and advocacy intentions among state legislators).

Hypothesis 2 (Preregistered, PH2): Both the narrative and narrative+argument condition will outperform the policy argument condition in shaping these outcomes (i.e., the narrative and the combination of abridged narrative with simple propolicy message would outperform the simple propolicy argument condition, alone, in generating state legislator policy support and advocacy intentions).

We also tested additional hypotheses about message effects on specific propolicy beliefs as well as common beliefs about the limitations of the policy. We conceptualized these additional hypotheses as explanatory variables to understand the potential for message-targeted beliefs to shape whether or not the message achieved its persuasive goal: increasing support for early childcare policies and advocacy intentions related to these policies. We considered these hypotheses secondary and, for the sake of simplicity and parsimony, did not preregister them:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): The narrative message will outperform the no-message control condition in promoting message-targeted beliefs in favor of the policy.

⁴ We used the complete narrative context including the characters' situation, story plot with fundamental conflict, and proposed solution to convey the value of equity: everyone getting what they need to succeed, irrespective of starting point. We did not use the word equity, specifically, as it is often conflated with equality (i.e., everyone getting the same), and because audiences' definitions of the term often are not shared. See for example an approach to standardizing the definition of equity in health by Braveman and Gruskin (2003).

⁵ We preregistered several study hypotheses and analytic procedures through the Open Science Foundation (OSF), (https://osf.io/mg4zk/?view_only=9aa62661343b4f629979a5160ed1fe04).

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Both the narrative and narrative+simple propolicy message conditions will outperform the simple propolicy argument in promoting message-targeted beliefs in favor of the policy.

Based on our prior work (Skurka et al., 2019; Skurka et al., 2020) and the political reality that many state policy issues have the potential for polarization among office holders whose elections are driven by partisan identities and voter preferences, we also explored the roles of party affiliation and fiscal and social ideologies on message effects:

RQ1: How will state legislators' political party affiliation influence the message effects hypothesized above?

RQ2: How will state legislators' fiscal and social ideologies influence the message effects hypothesized above?

Method

Study design overview

We recruited state legislators using a commercially available comprehensive database from the National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL) including contact information for all state legislators in the 50 U.S. states and U.S. territories.⁶ We invited all 7,387 current (at the time of the study) state legislators with a valid email address (14 additional legislators in the database had invalid or missing emails) to participate in the online survey experiment. Initial invitation emails were sent August 30, 2019. Eight reminder emails were sent between September 9 and November 25, 2019. A total of 6,641 initial nonrespondents also received three rounds of telephone reminder calls, beginning September 4 and concluding November 19, 2019.

We received 834 initial responses including 242 who provided consent and answered at least one of the questions that followed and 592 who consented and completed the survey. We first excluded participants with missing data for either main outcome variable (targeted policy support or policy advocacy intentions), which reduced our sample to 681 responses. We then examined recorded time spent on each message prompt and removed respondents who spent fewer than 20

⁶ This research was supported by the Evidence for Action Program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation [grant no. 76134]. This research was deemed exempt by the Institutional Review Boards at both sponsoring universities (Cornell University and Portland State University). All respondents provided electronic informed consent prior to participation. Details are available from the Cornell University Institutional Review Board for Human Participants. The preregistered full study instrument, including message prompts and survey items, are presented on the OSF website (https://osf.io/mg4zk/?view_only=9aa62661343b4f629979a5160ed1fe04).

seconds on any study message (a preregistered analytic decision) as brief interactions are an indicator of insufficient engagement to successfully complete the survey task. Removing those participants who dedicated insufficient time to messages reduced the final analytic sample to 623 respondents.

Respondents completed the study in a median of 18.2 minutes spread across an average of 4.7 days and spent an average of 2.5 minutes reading messages ($Mdn = 1.7$ minutes) in conditions other than the no-message control. Analysis of patterns of completion revealed a bimodal distribution of time to completion—395 respondents (63%) completed the survey in an hour or less, while 228 respondents (37%) took more than an hour to complete. This difference was driven by the fact that some legislators opened and/or began the survey but did not complete the study in that initial sitting; instead, they went back to complete it in days following, often following one of the email reminders.

We considered dropping respondents who took more than an hour to complete the study (under an assumption that they completed it in multiple sittings) but decided not to do so for several reasons. First, we did not preregister formal criteria for dropping respondents due to excessive time to completion and were thus hesitant to impose new criteria post facto. Second, both theory and data suggest that the effects of narrative messages are likely to endure over a period of at least several days. Multiple theorists have argued that unique elements of narrative processing, including cognitive and emotional connections with characters and vivid imagining of story elements, could make narrative effects more likely to endure than other forms of messaging (e.g., Appel & Richter, 2007; Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Cohen, 2001; Green & Brock, 2002). The accumulated empirical evidence also supports this assertion: a meta-analysis of 14 studies with 51 effect size estimates at time 1 (immediately after exposure) and 66 estimates at time 2 (an average of two weeks later) found that narrative message effects were comparable across baseline (Cohen's $d = .14$, $p = .003$) and subsequent assessments (Cohen's $d = .16$, $p = .001$) (Oschatz & Marker, 2020). Third, in our own data, we found no evidence of differences in estimated effect sizes between respondents who completed the study in less than one hour versus those who completed the study over a longer time span. Specifically, we performed analyses for all four outcome variables that included an indicator variable for time to completion ($t_{completion} = 1$ if ≤ 1 hour, 0 if > 1 hour), indicator variables for study condition (excluding the no message control group), and interaction items between the time to completion variable and each study condition ($y^{\wedge} = \beta * condition2 + \beta * condition3 + \beta * condition4 + \beta * t_{completion} + \beta * condition2 \text{ by } t_{completion} + \beta * condition3 \text{ by } t_{completion} + \beta * condition4 \text{ by } t_{completion} + \epsilon$), and inclusion of these interaction terms did not improve the model significantly (p values ranged from 0.18 to 0.83 across outcomes). Furthermore, we ran stratified analyses of each time to completion group (≤ 1 hour and 0 if > 1 hour) and found that coefficients did not change meaningfully in magnitude or direction. Thus, our preregistration, theory, prior evidence, and our own data each supported the decision to analyze all 623 cases.

Message conditions and content

Respondents were asked initial questions assessing their preexisting support for targeted childcare policies in the United States along with questions about other public health or social policies to avoid presensitizing the focal topic. We then randomly assigned respondents to one of four message conditions: a propolicy narrative (“narrative”), simple propolicy message (“simple-pro”), combined abridged propolicy narrative with simple propolicy message (“simple-pro + narrative”), or a no-message control (“control”) (see Table 1). Respondents were asked to read one of the three messages or no message at all (control). After reading their assigned message, respondents were presented the balance of the survey including questions about their postexposure policy support, advocacy intentions, message-targeted beliefs, demographics, and general fiscal and social ideologies—the latter of which have been shown to be uniquely influential in reasoning among policymakers (Purtle et al., 2018).

Table 1

Message Conditions Study Arms

<i>Arm</i>	<i>Approach</i>
Arm 1	Control condition—no message
Arm 2	Simple propolicy message
Arm 3	Propolicy narrative
Arm 4	Simple propolicy message + abridged propolicy narrative

All of the propolicy messages (simple-pro, narrative, and narrative+simple-pro) were structured around three targeted policies advanced by early childhood researchers and advocates: 1) state subsidies to families to help pay for childcare during parents’ working hours; 2) state financial incentives to childcare companies/organizations to increase the number of high-quality and affordable facilities available across all communities; and 3) state financial incentives to childcare companies/organizations to provide professional providers ongoing training and to assure a living wage.

The *simple propolicy message* (Arm 2) asserted, without accompanying narrative elements, the importance of investing in accessible, affordable, and high-quality childcare for all. It argued that state and local leaders should endorse policies that support families and the professionals who provide high-quality childcare. The message was structured around the value of equity by emphasizing support for all families particularly those starting with the least resources. The simple-pro message was 521 words (see preregistration link below for full text of all message conditions).

The *narrative message* (Arm 3) made the same propolicy arguments as in the simple-pro condition, embedded within a story about a couple named Alisha and Jason. The couple were described as working parents in Denver, CO, who recently had their second baby and were struggling to find high quality affordable childcare for their two young children so that Alisha could return to work. In telling the story of how Alisha and Jason worked to resolve the problem on their own, the narrative made the case that theirs was an increasingly common challenge for families in many communities: parents often must work to support their families in today's economy; access to affordable quality care is not available to everyone, everywhere; and the cost of childcare is so inaccessible for many young families that it forces impossible decisions about which life necessities to prioritize. The narrative further pointed to the familial, developmental, and socioeconomic benefits of access to quality childcare; placed Alisha and Jason's struggles in a broader social context; and related that context to the proposed solution by describing how specific policies could help ensure that all families have the childcare they need. This emphasis on meeting family needs irrespective of who they are and where they live was the core of the equity value message. The narrative message was 671 words.

The combined condition of *simple-pro + narrative* (Arm 4) asked respondents to read two separate but sequential messages. To eliminate redundancy across the two message prompts, the narrative message was abridged to avoid repeating arguments in the simple-pro message. The abridged narrative was 383 words, and the simple-pro message was 523 words.

Participants

Respondents were predominantly male (56.6%), an average of 58.1 years old (*Mdn* = 61.0), and highly educated (87.9% with college or advanced degree). Most identified as White (83.5%), 22.9% reported being parents, and 15.6% reported that they had children under the age of 5. More than half described themselves as Democrats (59.2%), 37.2% said they were Republicans, 2.7% reported being Independents, and <1% indicated "another party/no preference." Because we anticipated some would identify as Independents or unaffiliated, we also asked respondents to choose which of the two major parties, Democrat or Republican, most closely fit their perspectives. We used this closest party choice for the balance of our analyses, with 60.1% identifying as Democrats and 39.1% as Republicans.

In terms of ideology, 45.4% described themselves as socially liberal, 30.6% described themselves as socially moderate, and 24.0% socially conservative. At the same time, 21.3% described themselves as fiscally liberal, while 45.2% described themselves as fiscally moderate, and 33.5% described themselves as fiscally conservative. Of topical relevance to the messages tested, 202 respondents (35.5%) reported serving on the Health Committee in their state legislatures, while 197 respondents (34.7%) reported serving on their state's legislative Education Committee.

All but one state (Virginia) were represented in this study, as were two U.S. territories, Guam and Puerto Rico. Notably, some states (e.g., New Hampshire, Maine) contributed more

respondents than others (e.g., California, Florida), although to some extent this may be explained by variations in the size of state/territorial legislative bodies. As proportions of their legislatures, Guam (26.7%), Maine (21.0%), Utah (20.6%), New Mexico (17.9%), and Idaho (15.2%) participated most, while Virginia (0%), American Samoa (0%), Ohio (0.8%), California (1.7%), and Michigan (1.4%) participated least.

Respondent demographics and descriptive characteristics are presented in Table 2. We compared participant demographics to those in the state legislator database (gender, political party, and legislative chamber). Male legislators were less likely to participate than female legislators ($B = -0.41, p < .001$), and Republicans were less likely to participate than Democrats ($B = -0.37, p < .001$), but rates of participation were comparable across chambers (e.g., House Representatives versus Senators; House as comparison group: $B = -0.16, p = .115$).

Table 2

Participant Demographics and Descriptive Characteristics

	Frequency or Mean	% or SD	χ^2 or F, p value ¹
Age	61	58.11	$F(3, 549) = 1.14, p = 0.331$
Education			$\chi^2(9) = 13.93, p = 0.125$
Less than high school	0	0.00	
High school diploma/ Equivalent	9	1.60	
Some college/ Technical school	59	10.46	
Bachelor	195	34.57	
Advanced degrees	301	53.37	
Household Income			$\chi^2(12) = 13.79, p = 0.314$
\$0-\$24,999	2	0.37	
\$25,000-\$49,999	39	7.29	
\$50,000-\$74,999	59	11.03	
\$75,000-\$99,999	99	18.51	
100,000 or more	336	62.80	
Gender			$\chi^2(6) = 6.97, p = 0.324$
Female	238	43.27	
Male	311	56.55	
Transgender/ Non-binary	1	0.18	

Party			$\chi^2 (9) = 5.98, p = 0.742$
Republican	211	37.28	
Democrat	335	59.19	
Independent	15	2.65	
Another party/ No preference	5	0.88	
Closest Party Choice			$\chi^2 (3) = 3.49, p = 0.322$
Democrat	344	60.89	
Republican	221	39.12	
Social Ideology			$\chi^2 (18) = 12.72, p = 0.808$
Extremely liberal	65	11.48	
Liberal	192	33.92	
Slightly liberal	58	10.25	
Moderate	76	13.43	
Slightly conservative	39	6.89	
Conservative	113	19.97	
Extremely conservative	23	4.06	
Social Ideology (Collapsed)			$\chi^2 (6) = 7.57, p = 0.271$
Conservative	136	24.03	
Liberal	257	45.41	
Moderate	173	30.57	
Fiscal Ideology			$\chi^2 (18) = 16.38, p = 0.566$
Extremely liberal	20	3.53	
Liberal	101	17.81	
Slightly liberal	68	11.99	
Moderate	128	22.58	
Slightly conservative	60	10.58	
Conservative	150	26.46	
Extremely conservative	40	7.06	
Fiscal Ideology (Collapsed)			$\chi^2 (6) = 4.66, p = 0.588$
Conservative	190	33.51	
Liberal	121	21.34	
Moderate	256	45.15	

Race			
White	474	83.45	$\chi^2 (3) = 2.86, p = 0.413$
Black	47	8.28	$\chi^2 (3) = 0.14, p = 0.987$
Hispanic/Latinx	25	4.51	$\chi^2 (3) = 0.72, p = 0.869$
Another Race	41	7.22	$\chi^2 (3) = 2.07, p = 0.558$
Parents (with children under 5)	97	15.57	$\chi^2 (3) = 1.46, p = 0.692$
Parents	128	22.86	$\chi^2 (3) = 2.68, p = 0.443$
Health Committee	202	35.50	$\chi^2 (3) = 4.33, p = 0.228$
Education Committee	197	34.68	$\chi^2 (3) = 7.74, p = 0.052$
Total	623		

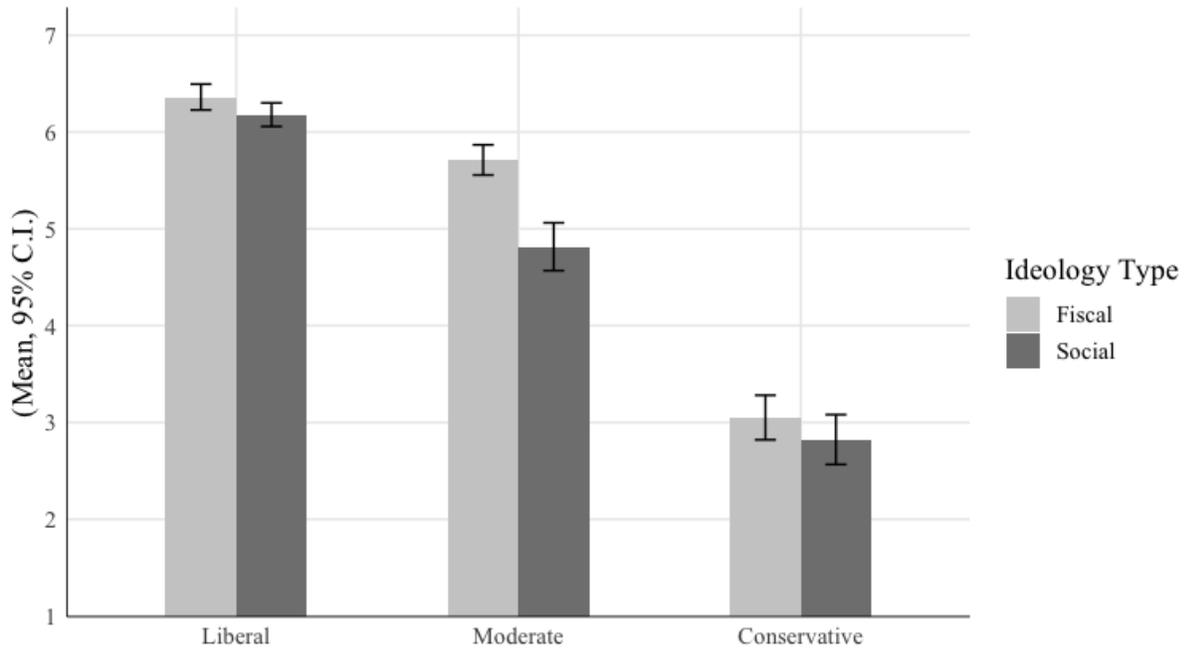
Note: The columns labeled, “ χ^2 or F for diff. by randomized group, p” present a formal test of whether the demographic characteristic was balanced between randomized groups.

Prior to message exposure, we asked participants to rate their relative levels of support or opposition (ranging from 1, strongly oppose, to 7, strongly support) to the three targeted policies for increasing affordable, high-quality childcare for all as well as to a series of nonchildcare public health and social policies as distraction items. The three items on targeted childcare policy support comprised a reliable composite measure ($M = 4.94, SD = 1.90, Cronbach's \alpha = 0.93$) and indicated that those identifying as fiscally or socially liberal, as well as those identifying as fiscally or socially moderate,⁷ exhibited significantly greater preexisting support for the targeted childcare policies incorporated in study messages than did those identifying as fiscally or socially conservative (Figure 1).

⁷ We aggregated fiscal and social ideologies from 7-points to 3-points, as follows: very liberal + liberal = liberal; slightly liberal + moderate + slightly conservative = moderate; conservative + very conservative = conservative.

Figure 1

Preexisting Targeted Policy Beliefs by Fiscal and Social Ideologies



Measures

Postexposure policy support

After reading the messages to which they were randomly assigned, we asked respondents to rate on a scale ranging from 1, strongly oppose, to 7, strongly support, their relative support for seven policies designed to ensure affordable, high-quality childcare for all. Three of these policies were the targeted policies explicitly incorporated in the message prompts. Both the targeted policy support items ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 1.90$, *Cronbach's* $\alpha = 0.94$) and the remaining four non-targeted childcare policy support items ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.58$, *Cronbach's* $\alpha = 0.89$) comprised separate reliable composite measures.

Postexposure advocacy intentions

For each of the three targeted policies, we then asked respondents how likely they were (ranging from 1, very unlikely, to 7, very likely) to “discuss the policy with other legislators,” “introduce the policy for debate,” and “ask a staffer to prepare a brief on the policy.” The nine targeted policy advocacy intention items comprised a reliable composite measure ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.55$, *Cronbach's* $\alpha = 0.96$).

Postexposure propolicy and antipolicy beliefs

Finally, we asked respondents to rate their levels of agreement (ranging from 1, strongly disagree, to 7, strongly agree) with seven message-targeted beliefs about childcare policies. Four of the seven belief statements were in support of the policy: “Accessible, affordable, and high-quality early childcare is a sound investment for American society,” “High-quality early childcare should be made more affordable because the cost is too high for many families,” “All children deserve a strong start in life through high-quality childcare,” and “High-quality early childcare is essential to the health of communities, businesses, and the local economy.” These four propolicy belief items comprised a reliable composite measure ($M = 5.76$, $SD = 1.44$, *Cronbach’s* $\alpha = 0.93$). The remaining three statements were in opposition to the policy: “State investment in early childcare programs is wasteful government spending,” “State investment in early childcare is not necessary because parents should take responsibility for planning, budgeting, and caring for the children they chose to have,” and “State investment in quality childcare is not necessary because parents should plan to stay home with their young children.” These three antipolicy belief items comprised a reliable composite measure ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.63$, *Cronbach’s* $\alpha = 0.92$).

Analysis

We used R Studio Version 1.2.5019 for all analyses. As preregistered on OSF, we first used χ^2 and ANOVA to test whether the demographics of each randomized group were comparable. Neither the ANOVA test nor the 15 χ^2 statistical tests were significant at $p < .05$.

We estimated ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models using indicator variables for the message conditions to test hypotheses about the effects of the simple-pro, narrative, and narrative+simple-pro messages on state legislators’ levels of policy support and advocacy intentions (*PH1*, *PH2*) as well as targeted beliefs (*H3*, *H4*). We rotated the comparison group to test for differences, first using the control group (Arm 1) as the comparison (*PH1*, *H3*) and then using the simple-pro message (Arm 2) as the comparison (*PH2*, *H4*).

Finally, we created interaction terms between political party affiliation (Republican, Democrat) and dummy variables for the randomized message conditions to test whether the effects of message condition differed by party affiliation (*RQ1*). We also created interaction terms between social and fiscal ideology and dummy variables for the randomized message conditions to test effects by fiscal and social ideologies (*RQ2*).

Results

Message effects on targeted policy support

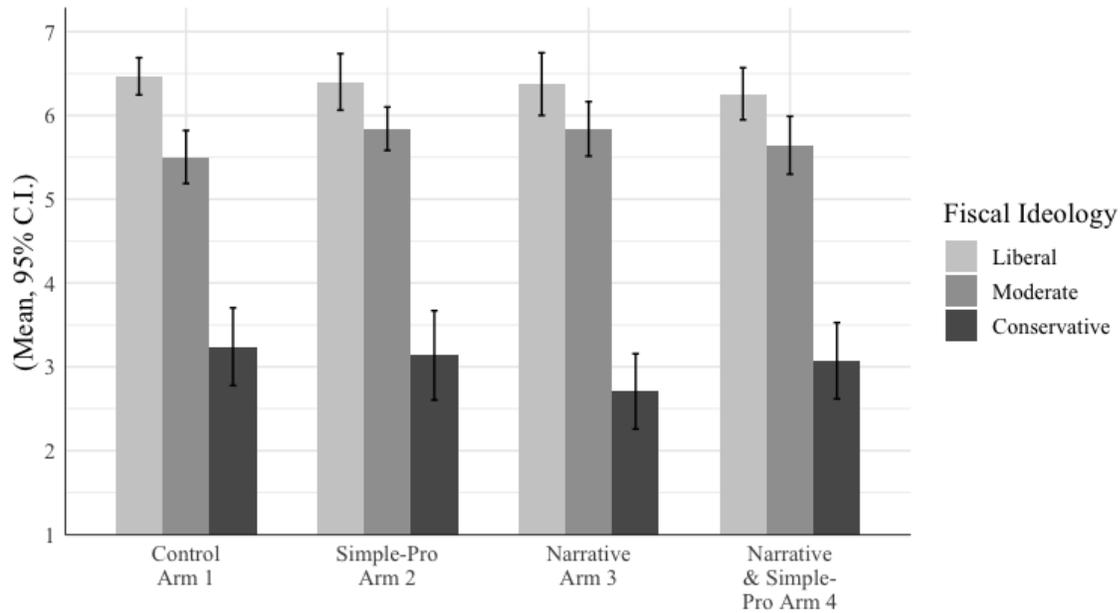
We first assessed the relative effects of the narrative, simple-pro, and combined narrative+simple-pro message conditions on targeted policy support. Contrary to our hypotheses, neither the narrative message ($B = -0.27, \beta = -0.06, p = .210$) nor the simple-pro message ($B = 0.04, \beta = -0.01, p = .862$) outperformed the no-exposure control group on overall targeted policy support. $PH1$ was thus rejected for the policy support outcome. Similarly, neither the narrative alone ($B = -0.31, \beta = -0.07, p = .174$) nor the combined strategy of narrative+simple-pro ($B = -0.27, \beta = -0.06, p = .215$) outperformed the simple-pro message on targeted policy support, overall. $PH2$ was thus rejected for the policy support outcome.

We next explored the role of political party affiliation (Republican or Democrat) in message effects on policy support (addressing $RQ1$). In step 1, we regressed targeted policy support on the three dummy coded message variables (with the control arm as the reference group) and state legislators' party affiliation (with Democrats as the reference group). Party affiliation was a significant predictor of targeted policy support, with Republicans having significantly less support for the policies incorporated in study messages as compared to Democrats by almost 3 points on a 7-point scale ($B = -2.96, \beta = -0.76, p < .001$). In step 2, we added the interaction terms between party affiliation and dummy coded message variables into the model. Adding the interaction items did not improve model fit (R square change is .004, F change is 1.81, $p = .144$) indicating that message effects on targeted policy support did not differ by party affiliation.

We next assessed the potential interactions of ideology (liberal, moderate, and conservative) with message strategy and the resultant effects on targeted policy support (addressing $RQ2$). We began with fiscal ideology as each of the targeted policies discussed would require state investments. In step 1, we regressed targeted policy support on the three dummy coded message variables (with the control arm as the reference group) and fiscal ideology (with liberals as the reference group). Fiscal ideology was a significant predictor of targeted policy support, and both conservatives ($B = -3.34, \beta = -0.83, p < .001$) and moderates ($B = -0.69, \beta = -0.18, p < .001$) showed significantly less support for the policies incorporated in study messages than liberals. Moderates' scores were, however, much closer to liberals than conservatives. We then added the interaction terms between fiscal ideology and the dummy coded message variables into the model. Adding the interaction items did not improve model fit (R -square = .006, $F = 1.15, p = .332$) indicating that (null) message effects on targeted policy support did not differ by fiscal ideology (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Fiscal Ideology as a Predictor of State Legislators' Targeted Policy Support Across Message Conditions



We continued with a parallel analysis of social ideology using the same 2-step modeling strategy. In step 1, social ideology was a significant predictor of targeted policy support, and both conservatives ($B = -3.36, \beta = -0.75, p < .001$) and moderates ($B = -1.34, \beta = -0.33, p < .001$) showed significantly less support for the policies incorporated in study messages than liberals. In contrast to fiscal ideology, social moderates scored roughly midway between liberals and conservatives. We then added the interaction terms between fiscal ideology and the dummy coded message variables. Adding the interaction items did not improve model fit ($R\text{-square} = .006, F = 1.07, p = .382$) indicating that (null) message effects on targeted policy support did not differ by social ideology.

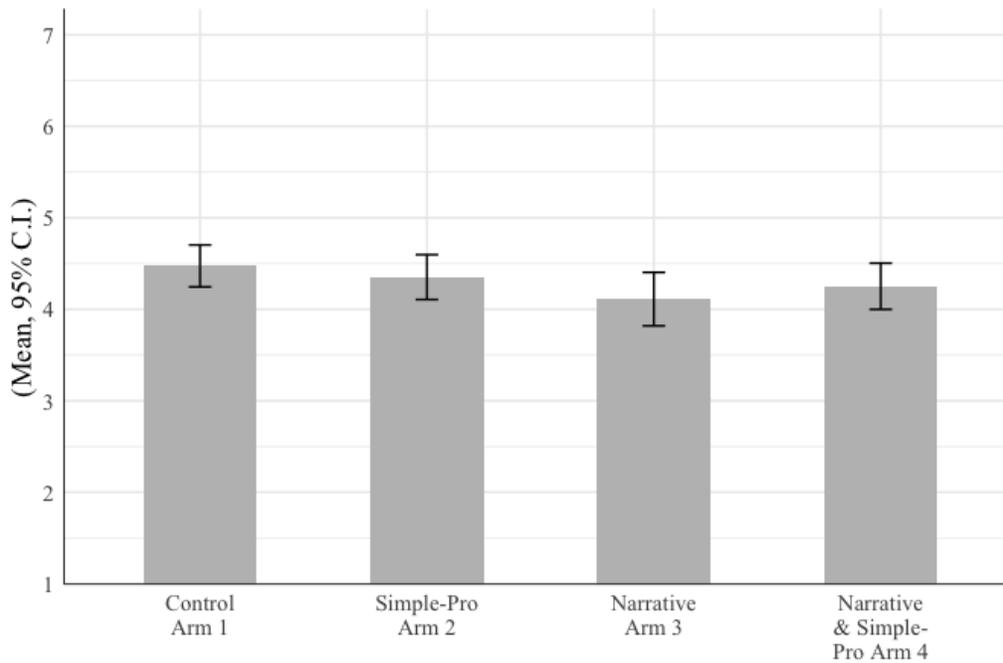
Message effects on advocacy intentions

Contrary to study hypotheses, the narrative message also did not outperform the no-exposure control group ($B = -0.36, \beta = -0.10, p = .044$) or the simple-pro message ($B = -0.24, \beta = -0.07, p = .205$) in promoting advocacy intentions. Indeed, the narrative message produced *lower* levels of state legislator advocacy intentions than did receiving no message at all, a result consistent with what is known as a backfire or boomerang effect, or when information perceived yields cognitive effects that are opposite of those intended (see Byrne & Hart, 2009; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). The combined strategy of narrative+simple-pro messages did not outperform the simple

propolicy message ($B = -0.10, \beta = -0.03, p = .590$) in promoting advocacy intentions. Thus, both *PH1* and *PH2* were rejected for advocacy intentions.

Figure 3

State Legislators' Advocacy Intentions Across Message Conditions

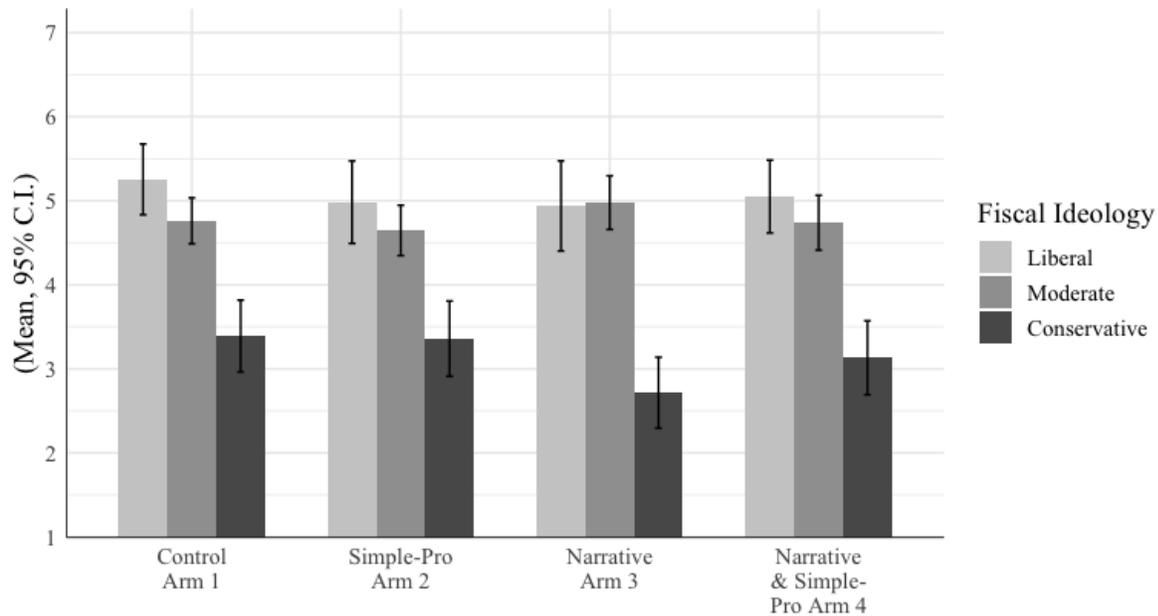


We then conducted regression analyses to compare message effects on advocacy intentions by party affiliation (again addressing RQ1). Party affiliation was a significant predictor of advocacy intentions with Republicans having significantly lower advocacy intentions compared to Democrats ($B = -1.71, \beta = -0.54, p < .001$). Adding the interaction items again did not improve model fit (R square change is .007, F change is 1.87, $p = .134$); message effects on advocacy intentions (the backfire effect of the narrative message) did not differ by party affiliation.

We repeated the regression analysis to compare the effects of fiscal ideology and message conditions on advocacy intentions. Fiscal ideology was a significant predictor, and both fiscal conservatives ($B = -1.93, \beta = -0.59, p < .001$) and fiscal moderates ($B = -0.30, \beta = -0.10, p < .001$) ranked significantly lower on advocacy intentions than fiscal liberals. Again, moderates' scores more closely approximated those of liberals than conservatives. Adding the interaction items did not improve the model fit (R -square = .012, $F = 1.52, p = .171$) indicating that message effects on advocacy intentions did not differ by fiscal ideology (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Fiscal Ideology as a Predictor of Legislators' Advocacy Intentions Across Message Conditions



We again repeated the analysis to compare the effects of social ideology and message conditions on advocacy intentions. Social ideology was a significant predictor of advocacy intentions, and both conservatives ($B = -1.99, \beta = -0.55, p < .001$) and moderates ($B = -0.64, \beta = -0.19, p < .001$) were less likely to report intentions to advocate for childcare policies than liberals. Again, in contrast to fiscal ideology, social moderates scored roughly between liberals and conservatives. Adding interaction terms between message conditions and social ideology did not improve model fit (R -square = .012, $F = 1.52, p = .168$). Message effects on advocacy intentions did not differ by social ideology.

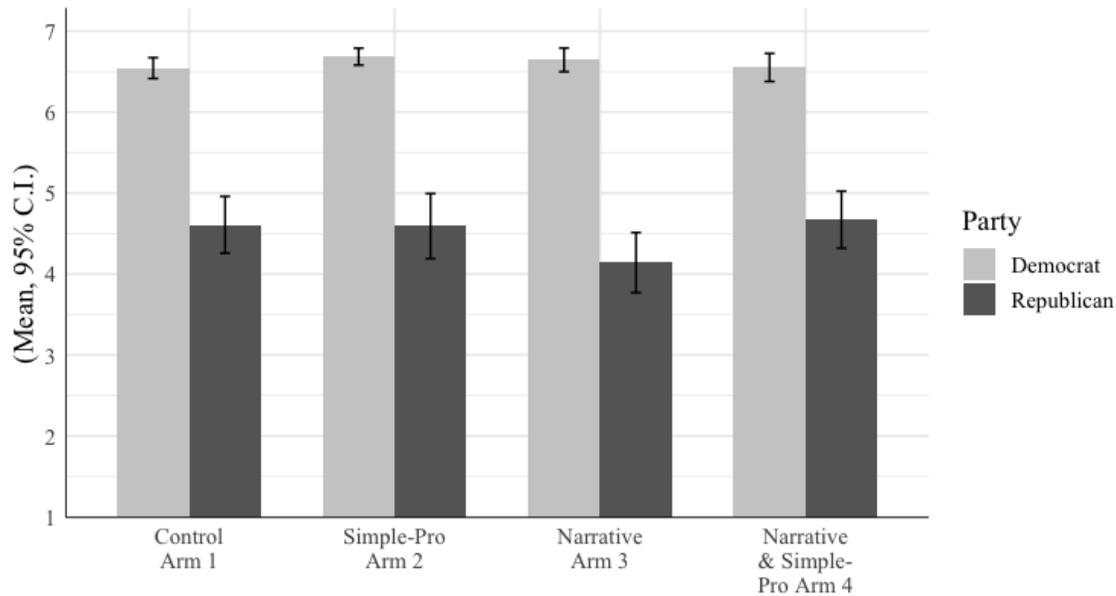
Message effects on policy beliefs

Again, contrary to our hypotheses, the narrative message performed marginally worse than the no-exposure control group ($B = -0.30, \beta = -0.09, p = .063$) and performed significantly worse than simple propolicy message ($B = -0.37, \beta = -0.11, p = .031$) in promoting propolicy beliefs in the overall sample. These results are again consistent with a backfire or boomerang effect. Further, the combined strategy of narrative+simple-pro did not outperform the simple-pro message alone ($B = -0.18, \beta = -0.05, p = .297$) in promoting propolicy beliefs overall. Thus, $H3$ and $H4$ were rejected. The narrative also performed significantly worse than both the control ($B = 0.42, \beta = 0.11, p = .022$) and the simple-pro message ($B = 0.49, \beta = 0.13, p = .012$) in reducing antipolicy beliefs. Further, the combined strategy of narrative+simple-pro did not differ from the simple-pro message ($B = 0.30, \beta = 0.08, p = .121$) in reducing antipolicy beliefs.

We repeated the regression analyses assessing the interactions of political party affiliation and message condition on pro and antipolicy beliefs (addressing RQ1). Political party affiliation was a significant predictor of propolicy beliefs with Republicans ranking propolicy beliefs significantly lower than Democrats ($B = -2.09, \beta = -0.72, p < .001$). Adding the interaction items significantly improved model fit ($R\text{-square} = .007, F = 2.66, p = .047$). Specifically, the coefficient for the narrative*Republican dummy variable was both negative and significant (using the control condition as the comparison; $B = -0.57, \beta = -0.12, p = .017$) indicating that the narrative message had a stronger deleterious effect on propolicy beliefs among Republicans compared to Democrats (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Political Party Affiliation as a Predictor of Legislators' Propolicy Beliefs Across Message Conditions



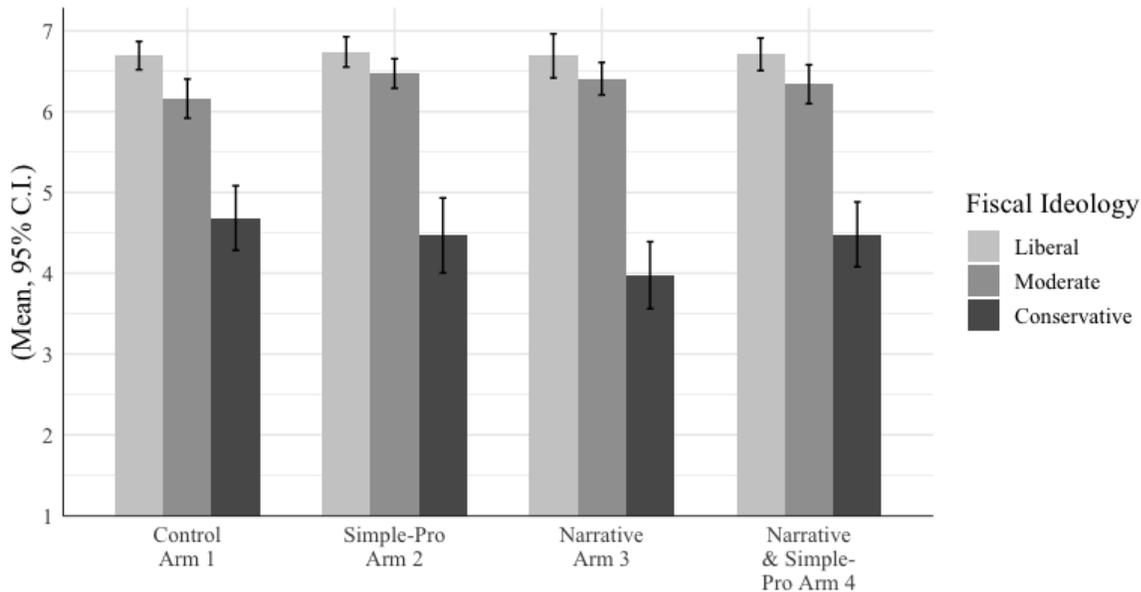
Party affiliation was also a significant predictor of antipolicy beliefs with Republicans agreeing with antipolicy beliefs much more strongly than Democrats ($B = 2.41, \beta = 0.72, p < .001$). Adding interaction items did not improve model fit ($R\text{-square} = .004, F = 1.75, p = .156$) indicating that message effects on antipolicy beliefs did not differ by party affiliation.

We next compared effects of fiscal ideology and message condition on pro and antipolicy beliefs. Fiscal ideology was a predictor of propolicy beliefs, as both fiscal conservatives ($B = -2.30, \beta = -0.75, p < .001$) and fiscal moderates ($B = -0.38, \beta = -0.13, p < .001$) had significantly lower agreement with propolicy beliefs than did fiscal liberals (although moderates' scores were much closer to fiscal liberals across all conditions). Adding the interaction items marginally improved model fit ($R\text{-square} = .007, F = 2.05, p = .057$). Specifically, the coefficient for the

narrative*fiscal conservatives dummy variable was both negative and significant (using the control condition as the comparison group; $B = -0.70$, $\beta = -0.14$, $p = .040$) meaning that the narrative had a stronger deleterious effect on propolicy beliefs among fiscal conservatives compared to fiscal liberals (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Fiscal Ideology as a Predictor of Legislators' Propolicy Beliefs Across Message Conditions



Fiscal ideology was also a significant predictor of antipolicy beliefs, as both fiscal conservatives ($B = 2.74$, $\beta = 0.78$, $p < .001$) and fiscal moderates ($B = 0.49$, $\beta = 0.15$, $p < .001$) registered stronger antipolicy beliefs than did fiscal liberals. Adding the interaction items did not improve model fit, however (R -square = .006, $F = 1.06$, $p = .384$) indicating that message effects on anti-policy beliefs did not differ by fiscal ideology.

The final step of the analysis compared social ideology and message condition on pro and antipolicy beliefs. Social ideology was a predictor, as both social conservatives ($B = -2.38$, $\beta = -0.70$, $p < .001$) and social moderates ($B = -0.85$, $\beta = -0.27$, $p < .001$) had significantly lower agreement with propolicy beliefs than did social liberals (with moderates' scores roughly midway between social conservatives and liberals). Adding the interaction items did not improve model fit (R -square = .012, $F = 1.93$, $p = .075$) indicating that message effects on antipolicy beliefs did not differ by social ideology. Social ideology was also a significant predictor of antipolicy beliefs, as both social conservatives ($B = 2.87$, $\beta = 0.74$, $p < .001$) and social moderates ($B = 1.04$, $\beta = 0.29$, $p < .001$) registered stronger antipolicy beliefs than did social liberals. Adding interaction items did not improve model fit (R -square = .006, $F = 1.14$, $p = .335$) indicating that message effects on antipolicy beliefs did not differ by social ideology.

Discussion

Contrary to expectations and prior research, the current study found that neither the narrative nor simple propolicy appeal was effective in persuading state legislators to support or advocate for state investments in accessible, affordable, high-quality childcare for all. In fact, exposure to a narrative message diminished advocacy intentions overall and reduced propolicy beliefs among those identifying as Republicans and fiscal conservatives. What, then, does this mean for policy advocates who are commonly advised and trained to personalize and tell the story of the issue in appealing to the legislators they wish to persuade? Further, what implications do the results offer for broader theorizing about the conditions under which stories can persuade key audiences?

We offer a number of potential explanations for the effects we observed. First, respondents identifying as fiscally and socially liberal entered the study with very high levels of preexisting targeted policy support scoring at 6.36 and 6.18 on a 7-point scale, respectively. As such, there was not much room to shift support upward. Although the messaging strategies assessed did not significantly enhance enthusiasm for the targeted policy initiatives among these groups, it is also important that they, by and large, did not dampen preexisting support. The observed negative effect on advocacy intentions, while not significantly moderated by fiscal ideology, appears to be driven by declines among fiscal conservatives, as shown in Figure 4. This tendency also held among those identifying as fiscally moderate, whose entering levels of enthusiasm for policies also were high (5.71 on the 7-point scale) and whose response patterns approximated and generally mirrored—albeit at a slightly lesser magnitude—those of liberals across all measures. Thus, as an advocacy strategy, each message approach described here could help to reinforce preexisting support among those initially inclined toward the policy.

The same cannot be said for those identifying as fiscal conservatives and Republicans. Their entering levels of support for the policy initiatives presented ranked at near 3.0 (“slightly oppose”) on the 7-point scale (3.05, 3.17, respectively), which would have provided room for increase had the narrative message not undermined propolicy beliefs in these groups. We are not the first to have observed a backfire or boomerang effect in persuasive messaging (see Byrne & Hart, 2009); others have demonstrated that such effects can result from partisan reasoning (Gollust et al., 2009; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Our findings suggest there is a risk that advocates may, in communicating with partisan decision makers, inadvertently encourage retrenchment into prior beliefs through message choice. It is a risk that those seeking to persuade such audiences should consider in both advocacy strategy and message design.

It is particularly noteworthy that the equity-based narrative and simple-pro messages presented in this study were the same as those that proved effective in eliciting policy support among general public (non-legislative) audiences in a study also conducted during fall 2019. In that general public study, the narrative proved more effective than the control message in increasing policy support, irrespective of respondents’ political party affiliation, and was more effective than the simple-pro message in generating policy support among audiences initially least likely to support the policies (Niederdeppe et al., in press).

We can only surmise the reasons for such stark differences across audiences. First, it is important to recognize that early childcare policy debates were not new to the state and territorial legislatures surveyed; most had recently or were currently considering related issues. As such, the policies presented in messages were likely not abstractions and instead those that respondents could envision in context and relative to others they have addressed and will consider. In addition to potentially having been primed on the issue of state support for childcare, in general, respondents also may have had in mind their own legislative records on these and similar initiatives, which could have shaped their thinking in this study independent of the messages presented. However, we also emphasize that we found no evidence that participation in health or education committees moderated the pattern of effects on any outcome (results available upon request).

It is also important that this survey was conducted in a highly polarized partisan era across all levels of society including state legislatures (Doherty et al., 2019). To some unknown extent, we surmise that the sharp divides observed throughout the study may have been well-established from the start and rooted in transactional political histories within the legislatures in which respondents serve. These contexts were not a feature of our assessment, however, and as such remain only a conjecture.

It also may be notable that the messages tested were structured around the value of equity. This structure was important because equity is a core value underlying the policy strategies proposed. We were confident in the approach as the same equity-based messages resonated well *across* political ideologies in the general public study just conducted. We also thought this recent outcome particularly compelling as previous work had found that the value of equity resonated more strongly on the ideological left than right (Skurka et al., 2019). The present study may reflect that earlier pattern of value polarization, given this effect was not observed with these same messages in our more recent general public work. The combined advocacy takeaway may be that the value of equity remains challenging to convey to political conservatives in highly partisan settings and that there are subtleties to the conditions in which it resonates that we do not yet fully understand. We also cannot escape the possibility that, despite these many plausible arguments to explain the differences we observed, our findings may simply reveal that narrative messaging is not an effective strategy on this issue with state legislators.

Still, our study offers strategic implications for policy advocates working to advance accessible, affordable, quality childcare for all. At a fundamental level, if legislative bodies are highly polarized and the most partisan members unlikely to move from their initial positions, it may be those in the middle—often identifying as moderate on an issue—who become important persuasive foci (for examples of stakeholder mapping, see UNICEF, 2010). Our analysis may offer some utility to that approach. As described previously, fiscal moderates presented with high initial levels of policy support and demonstrated message response patterns much like liberals, across all measures. Similarly, social moderates' initial levels of policy support also began in the positive range, although more tempered, and their responses reflected (albeit at a lesser magnitude than fiscal moderates) the general patterns of liberal audiences. These patterns

suggest that moderates' policy perspectives may be reinforced, though perhaps not moved toward even greater support, through messaging. Further, fiscal moderates consistently presented with higher levels of policy support than did social moderates. This finding may be instructive to advocates developing strategy on this issue, specifically in determining with whom to focus and when.

Importantly, this research also reinforces the subtleties of advocacy strategy and communication targets recommended in both media advocacy and public interest communications. We found that telling the story, a common advocacy tactic, can have unintended effects that challenge or even harm advocacy efforts. Thus, as always in planning communication strategy, context and knowledge of specific audiences (i.e., the potential micro-level effects on state legislators) matter. Moreover, these findings, taken in combination with those of the overlapping general public study, may suggest the need to situationally reorder the primacy of advocacy communication targets. Specifically, these findings may indicate a need to shift, in some circumstances, from the traditional media advocacy and public interest communications' emphasis on powerholders or decision makers as the primary audience to those who are in positions to influence them and who typically are considered secondary audiences. In other words, if polarization or entrenchment on issues is leading to resistance among decision-maker audiences, advocates may consider working through audiences who can be persuasively reached through messages: in this case, constituents who, in turn, can provide political permission to their legislative representatives to shift their views on the issue.

From a theoretical perspective, these results also complicate the question of the conditions under which narrative messages may persuade or may backfire (see Byrne & Hart, 2009). As noted in the introduction, metaanalyses find that narrative messages can persuade and tend to produce a small but positive effect on attitudes and beliefs among audiences (Braddock & Dillard, 2016; Shen et al., 2015). At the same time, most of this work has been conducted with convenience samples (e.g., students, volunteers in web-based panels), and thus research has rarely tested the effects of narratives on policy makers. Policy makers are audiences for whom, among other differences from the general public, (a) the stakes of adopting a position are likely higher in that they have vested authority to allocate resources, (b) advocacy messages compete with many other inputs including budgetary limitations, negotiations with other legislators, and (c) legislators may themselves strategically use stories to advance their own policy goals. Stories that resonate among the general public, like those tested here, thus may be read with much greater skepticism by these engaged audiences, particularly those who are inclined to oppose the message's articulated position. It is also important that average effects, as estimated in a metaanalysis, do not guarantee that a particular message strategy will be helpful in each context in which it is used. Indeed, even strategies that work on average may backfire under some conditions if the average effect size is characterized by a great deal of variance in the direction and magnitude of effects. All told, these results invite a need to test strategic narratives among a broader set of audiences and populations to identify the boundaries and even pitfalls of narrative persuasion.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, although our sample included participants from all 50 states and two territories, respondents represented only approximately 10% of eligible state and territorial legislators. Distribution of participants across legislatures was also uneven with some states or territories relatively overrepresented as compared to others. Democrats, also, were more likely to respond to our survey, and female legislators were represented in our sample in greater proportion (43.3%) than they appear in statehouses (29%; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020). As such, our findings may not be generalizable to U.S. state and territorial legislatures overall.

Second, when a study has negative and unanticipated findings, it is also important to ask whether the instruments applied were flawed: in this context, the messages tested. We acknowledge that it was not possible in a study exploring childcare policies and those involving family subsidies in particular to avoid these labels as would have been recommended by the cognitive linguistics and framing research described previously (e.g., Gilliam & Bales, 2004; Lakoff & Grady, 1998). Instead, we sought to couch both in their broader societal contexts—also as recommended in this literature—while emphasizing the child and socioeconomic benefits to be realized. Perhaps the more significant limitation is that our narrative, in particular, told a story of a family challenged by return to work following the birth of a second child. Emphasis on parental work was cautioned in this prior research, even while these studies also emphasized the need to convey families' hard economic realities. We determined that working with the types of stories with which legislators likely are challenged in their districts was important enough to construct this story while linking the circumstances portrayed to broader societal contexts and the critical policy choices faced. Moreover, the simple-pro message, which did not have the same return to work emphasis, did not fare better. And, as previously described, these same study messages garnered a positive outcome among general public audiences in the research we conducted quasicontemporaneously. All told, these conditions reinforce our thinking that the differences observed across studies were more likely rooted in audience and context than in the messages themselves.

Finally, it is also important to note that this work was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated widespread physical distancing procedures that effectively shuttered many childcare facilities nationwide. The experiences of struggling families during (as of this writing) these past 13 months—and the magnified inequities in access and affordability across populations that have resulted—have cast a stark spotlight on the importance of affordable quality childcare for all our youngest community members. We acknowledge that it is possible that state legislators' perspectives on early childcare policies may have shifted as a result of this recent history and the experiences of their constituents over the course of these many affected months. However, as we noted at the outset, early childcare and education were at crises levels across the United States prior to the pandemic. And, as demonstrated in our findings, some legislators (Democrats and Moderates) began at very high levels of policy support, and we think

it very unlikely that the added emergency could have dampened it. We are left to only wonder, then, whether this crisis-upon-crisis has sufficiently moved the needle into support among those who were deeply reticent (by our measures) to support these policies in the latter months leading up to the pandemic. It is certainly a question worthy of exploration.

Conclusion

In this research we responded to the call among NPF researchers for “empirical study of how such narrative political tactics of interest groups, the media, and elites actually influence decision-maker behavior and opinion” (Jones & McBeth, 2010, p. 345). In so doing we found that state legislator audiences responded both differently than anticipated to policy narratives and in contrast to common wisdom about advocacy messaging with elected leaders.

We wish to conclude by agreeing with Boswell (2013) that “an improved understanding of narrative can aid in the study of deliberative systems more generally” (p. 633). Our research may help answer that question if only by indicating that there are subtleties to the advocacy messaging formula that remain to be fully appreciated and that one established advocacy strategy—in this case, narrative messaging—may not fit all circumstances or audiences. The media advocacy prime directive, then, does not change: overarching goals and policy strategy must always drive message strategy.

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