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Journal of Experimental Social Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jesp

Choosing persuasion targets: How expectations of qualitative change increase advocacy intentions[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Advocacy
Attitude change
Qualitative change
Persuasion
Targeting

ABSTRACT

Advocacy is a topic of increasing import in the attitudes literature, but researchers know little to nothing about how people (i.e., persuaders) choose their targets (i.e., the recipients of their advocacy). Four main experiments and six supplemental studies (total $N = 3684$) demonstrate that people prefer to direct persuasion efforts toward individuals who seem poised to shift their attitudes qualitatively (e.g., from negative to positive) rather than non-qualitatively (e.g., from positive to more positive). This preference stems from the fact that qualitative attitude change is perceived as greater in magnitude and expected to have a larger impact on behavior. These findings provide initial insight into the factors that drive persuasion target selection, and are inconsistent with what past persuasion research, conventional marketing wisdom, and our empirical evidence suggests persuaders *should* do. People tend to select persuasion targets they believe they can change qualitatively, but at least sometimes can have greater persuasive impact by targeting individuals who are already leaning in their direction.

Advocacy is a topic of increasing import in the attitudes literature. A number of recent investigations have shifted their focus from identifying the factors that facilitate persuasion to understanding the factors that stimulate advocacy—that is, that induce people to express their views and/or attempt to persuade others (e.g., Akhtar, Paunesku, & Tormala, 2013; Akhtar & Wheeler, 2016; Bohns, Newark, & Boothby, 2018; Cheatham & Tormala, 2015, 2017; Gal & Rucker, 2010; Rios, 2012; Rios, DeMarree, & Statzer, 2014; Rocklage, Rucker, & Nordgren, 2018). This is a growing area of research and an issue of practical importance. Interestingly, though, one important aspect of advocacy that we still know little about is how people (i.e., advocates) select their targets (i.e., the recipients of their advocacy).

How do people choose persuasion targets? Whose attitudes are people most likely to try to change? The current research examines how persuasion target selection depends on the *type* of attitude change people believe they can cause. Imagine someone who works for a political advocacy group. She has created a message that she hopes will produce a favorable shift in voters' attitudes toward a policy on an upcoming ballot. Her goal is to effect a 2-point shift in voters' attitudes, measured on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly opposed) to 9 (strongly in favor), with a neutral midpoint of 5. However, due to financial or time constraints, the advocate needs to decide who to target with the

message. She could target voters who are very negative toward the policy (e.g., 2 on the scale) in the hopes of moving them to a less negative position (e.g., 4), she could target voters who are somewhat negative (4) to shift them to somewhat positive (6), or she could target voters who are already somewhat positive (6) to shift them to an even more positive stance (8). Who would she target? Who should she target?

Prior work is silent on this question. We posit that in a situation like this, the advocate would be most inclined to target the second group of voters. That is, we postulate that people are more likely to target others for persuasion when they believe they will change their attitudes in valence—from negative to positive or positive to negative—than when they believe they will change their attitudes *within* valence—for example, from negative to less negative or positive to more positive. Importantly, though, we also submit that this target selection can be suboptimal. That is, in at least some instances, advocates would be better off selecting targets who already lean in their direction and can be shifted to a more extreme level of support.

1. Persuasion target selection: a qualitative change perspective

The primary objective of the current research is to provide insight

[☆] This paper has been recommended for acceptance by Roger Giner-Sorolla.

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into how people select targets for persuasion. Specifically, we examine how people select targets based on the type of attitude change they believe they can produce. Our central hypothesis is that people are more likely to select a particular target for persuasion when they believe they can shift the valence of the target's attitude. We base this hypothesis on recent work showing that people perceive qualitative attitude change (i.e., change in attitude valence) as larger in magnitude and behavioral impact than otherwise equivalent non-qualitative attitude change (i.e., change *within* attitude valence). [Bechler, Tormala, and Rucker \(2019\)](#) found that even when the objective degree of change was held constant, people judged attitude change as greater and as leading to more substantial changes in subsequent behavior when it involved a shift across rather than within valence—in other words, when it was qualitative as opposed to non-qualitative.

To illustrate, in one study, [Bechler et al. \(2019\)](#) told participants about a person named Ashley, who had been thinking about the benefits and drawbacks of self-driving cars for a few months. Over time, her attitude toward self-driving cars had shifted. All participants read that on a scale ranging from -50 (“strongly opposed”) to $+50$ (“strongly in favor”), with a “neutral” midpoint of 0, Ashley's attitude toward self-driving cars had moved up 12 points. Importantly, though, the location of that shift on the scale, and thus the type of change Ashley had experienced, was manipulated. In the qualitative change condition, her attitude changed in valence, from “somewhat opposed” to “somewhat in favor” (-6 to $+6$ on the scale). In the non-qualitative change conditions, her attitude changed *within* valence, from “pretty opposed” to “less opposed” (-18 to -6) in one case and from “somewhat in favor” to “more in favor” ($+6$ to $+18$) in another. Although numerically equivalent change (i.e., 12 points) had been described in each condition, participants perceived that change to be greater in magnitude and behavioral impact in the qualitative rather than non-qualitative change conditions. In other words, participants viewed Ashley's attitude change as greater and as more likely to affect her future behavior when it involved a shift across rather than within valence.

Why do people perceive qualitative attitude change as greater than non-qualitative attitude change? [Bechler et al.](#) proposed a processing fluency account. They hypothesized and found that qualitative change is easier for people to detect and understand than non-qualitative change, and this ease amplifies the perceived magnitude of change. In essence, it is easier for people to process change across (e.g., negative to positive) rather than within (e.g., somewhat positive to more positive) valence, and the easier it is to process change the greater people assume that change must be. Consistent with this logic, in the experiment involving Ashley and self-driving cars, participants reported greater ease of processing under conditions of qualitative rather than non-qualitative change. Greater ease predicted greater perceived change, which in turn predicted estimates of increased behavioral impact.

As it turns out, [Bechler et al.](#)'s account is bolstered by considerable research in categorical perception demonstrating that differences between stimuli are both easier to detect and seemingly greater in magnitude when they span a categorical, or qualitative, boundary (e.g., [Bornstein, 2006](#); [Bornstein & Korda, 1984](#); [Goldstone & Hendrickson, 2010](#); [Krueger & Clement, 1994](#); [Lacetera, Pope, & Sydnor, 2012](#); [Roberson & Davidoff, 2000](#)). For instance, people find it easier to distinguish between colors of different hue (e.g., blue and green) than colors of the same hue (e.g., light and dark blue), even when those colors are separated by the exact same physical distance (in wavelength) on the color spectrum (e.g., [Bornstein, 2006](#); [Bornstein & Korda, 1984](#); [Roberson & Davidoff, 2000](#)). Likewise, people view cars to have depreciated more in value when their mileage shifts across an apparent categorical threshold (e.g., from 99,000 to 101,000 versus from 101,000 to 103,000; [Lacetera et al., 2012](#)), and estimate differences in temperature between two days to be greater when those days belong to different months as opposed to the same month (e.g., [Krueger & Clement, 1994](#)).

In sum, both [Bechler et al. \(2019\)](#) and the categorical perception

literature more broadly suggest that it is easier for people to perceive qualitative as opposed to non-qualitative differences, and that qualitative differences seem larger as a result. The current research builds on this premise to examine how people select persuasion targets. We postulate that persuaders exhibit a preference to target people they believe they can shift across (i.e., qualitative change) rather than within (i.e., non-qualitative change) valence, and we submit that this effect is driven by the perceived magnitude and behavioral impact of the change in question.

2. A suboptimal targeting strategy

Our primary hypothesis is that persuaders generally prefer to target individuals whose attitudes they believe they can change in valence. As a secondary hypothesis, we propose that this preference can promote suboptimal targeting decisions. That is, targeting attitude shifts across rather than within valence might at least sometimes reduce one's persuasive impact (i.e., the degree of attitude and behavior change one can effect). When it is unclear how persuasive one's message is, for instance, it might generally behoove persuaders to opt for targets who already lean in their direction. Indeed, individuals on the same side of an issue who can be polarized, or shifted to more extreme support (e.g., voters with attitudes of 6 in the opening example), might prove more open to attitude and behavior change in many instances. This observation is based on findings from both message positioning and attitude strength research.

First, a message positioning perspective suggests that trying to convert targets from one valence to another could limit persuaders' success in many cases. Generally speaking, people are more receptive to proattitudinal (i.e., attitude-congruent, same-valence) messages than to counterattitudinal (i.e., attitude-incongruent, opposing-valence) messages, as well as to messages from similar rather than dissimilar others (e.g., [Clark & Wegener, 2013](#); [Hart et al., 2009](#); [Mackie, Gastardo-Conaco, & Skelly, 1992](#); [Mackie, Worth, & Asuncion, 1990](#)). One explanation is that proattitudinal messages tend to elicit reduced counterarguing relative to counterattitudinal messages, which enhances the persuasive impact of the former relative to the latter (e.g., [Cacioppo & Petty, 1979](#); [Petty & Cacioppo, 1979](#)). Thus, efforts to shift people across valence—that is, to create qualitative change—might tend to meet more resistance than efforts to shift people within valence—for example, to shift them from moderate to extreme on the same side of an issue. According to a message positioning perspective, then, selecting targets who already lean toward one's position or argument, who can be shifted to more extreme support—6s in the opening example—would generally increase one's persuasive success.

Additionally, an attitude strength perspective ([Petty & Krosnick, 1995](#)) suggests that shifting people in extremity—from moderately to extremely positive, for example—could have greater behavioral impact than shifting people in valence if the latter moves targets from one moderate position (e.g., somewhat negative) to another (e.g., somewhat positive). Indeed, attitude extremity is a core dimension of attitude strength (e.g., [Abelson, 1995](#); [Bassili, 1996](#); [Krosnick, Boninger, Chuang, Berent, & Carnot, 1993](#)), and it is well-established that strong attitudes have more impact on behavior than do weak attitudes (see [Krosnick & Petty, 1995](#)). In a political context, for instance, voters with extreme rather than moderate negative attitudes would be more likely to vote against something, and voters with extreme rather than moderate positive attitudes would be more likely to vote in favor of it. Thus, changing people's attitudes from extremely to moderately negative (2 to 4 in the opening example) or from moderately to extremely positive (6 to 8) would likely have a behavioral impact, whereas changing people's attitudes from moderately negative to moderately positive (4 to 6) might not. In the latter situation, targets would hold moderate low impact attitudes before and after persuasion, meaning their attitude change might not be accompanied by a meaningful shift in behavior. In essence, because people with weak attitudes are often uninclined to act,

shifts from moderately negative to moderately positive, or vice versa, might exert negligible impact on behavior.

In short, both the message positioning and attitude strength literatures converge in suggesting that the best targets for persuasion might often be people who already lean in the persuader's direction. These targets are more open to the persuader's message (thus allowing for persuasion) and more likely to show meaningful behavior change (because they become more extreme, and extreme attitudes have greater influence over behavior). Thus, we predicted that although persuaders would gravitate toward valence change in target selection, they might at least sometimes have more persuasive impact when they target individuals already leaning in their direction. To situate this prediction in the opening political advocacy example, we hypothesized that although persuaders would tend to target moderately negative voters in order to move them to moderately positive, they might frequently be better off targeting moderately positive voters to move them to more extreme positive positions.

3. Overview

Across four main experiments (plus six supplemental studies) we find consistent evidence that people are more likely to target others for persuasion when they believe they can shift their attitudes in valence. Experiment 1 provides an initial test of this effect, showing that even when the degree of change a persuader can cause in someone's attitude is uncertain (or unspecified), people prefer to target others whose attitudes seem poised to change in valence. Experiment 2 extends the findings by holding constant the amount of change persuaders believe they can cause and providing an initial examination of mechanism. Experiment 3 further explores the underlying process driving this effect, and Experiment 4 provides empirical evidence that persuaders' target selection can be suboptimal. For all experiments, sample sizes were determined prior to data collection based on study-design and participant availability. We attempted to have sufficient statistical power by aiming for over 100 participants per experimental condition (or per attitude group in the final study). We report all manipulations, conditions, participant exclusions, measures, and results for our experiments and detailed materials for them are available in the Supplemental materials.

4. Experiment 1

Experiment 1 provided an initial test of our hypothesis that people are more likely to select persuasion targets whose attitudes seem poised to change in valence. To situate the target decision in a concrete context that was not inherently categorical by its very nature, we asked participants to imagine that they worked for the financial services company Wells Fargo and were tasked with determining which of three groups of consumers to target with a new advertisement promoting the company: consumers who were currently very negative, currently somewhat negative, or currently somewhat positive toward Wells Fargo. Participants indicated which of these groups they would target in a forced choice task.

Importantly, while people often know where potential targets stand on attitude issues before targeting them, we recognize that it might be relatively uncommon for them to have clear insight into the precise degree of change they can bring about (e.g., 2 points on a 1–9 scale). Thus, in Experiment 1, we described the current attitude of each potential target, but did not include information about how much change participants would be able to effect. We assumed that participants would perceive qualitative change to be most likely among individuals with somewhat negative attitudes (i.e., consumers who were negative but close to the neutral threshold) rather than very negative or somewhat positive attitudes (who were further from the neutral threshold or already positive, respectively), and thus predicted that participants would be most likely to target those with somewhat negative attitudes.

4.1. Method

A total of 298 participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk took part for monetary compensation. A sensitivity analysis (GPower; Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) revealed 80% power to detect an effect size of $w = 0.16$ using the analysis we conducted in this experiment.

At the outset of the experiment, participants were informed that the study was about the financial services company Wells Fargo, which had received bad press due to a series of crises over the past several years. Participants read actual excerpts taken from a CNN timeline of events that described some of the bad press involving the company between September 2016 and February 2018 (e.g., “Federal regulators reveal Wells Fargo employees secretly created millions of unauthorized bank and credit card accounts without their customers knowing it. The bank is hit with a \$185 million fine”; Wattles, Geier, & Egan, 2018). Participants were informed that consumers' attitudes toward the company had been shifting to become more negative as a result of the company's scandals, and that a consulting firm predicted that, “Wells Fargo will suffer the loss of thousands of banking customers in the next year” (Consumer Affairs; Huffman, 2018).

Following this information, participants played the role of an employee who worked in marketing at Wells Fargo. They read that they had an advertisement that, based on focus groups, could shift consumers' attitudes toward the company to become more positive. All participants then viewed an actual Wells Fargo advertisement (Wells Fargo, 2019), which was identified as the advertisement they had at their disposal. Of importance, participants learned that due to financial constraints they could target only one segment (or group) of potential customers. Participants were presented with three different customer segments—Segments A, B, and C, identified through market research—whose attitudes toward Wells Fargo varied. On a scale ranging from 1 to 9, where 1 meant “extremely dislike,” 9 meant “extremely like,” and 5 meant “neutral,” Segment A's average customer attitude was a 2 (“dislike a lot”), Segment B's average customer attitude was a 4 (“somewhat dislike”), and Segment C's average customer attitude was a 6 (“somewhat like”). Because the likelihood of qualitative attitude change in this case would be highest for targets holding slightly negative attitudes, Segment B represented the qualitative change option, and Segments A and C represented the non-qualitative change options, though this was not communicated to participants.

After receiving this information, participants were asked, “Which segment would you choose to target with the advertisement?” Participants selected Segment A, B, or C in a forced choice format.

4.2. Results

As illustrated in Fig. 1, 67.4% of participants reported that they would target Segment B, the somewhat negative group who had the highest likelihood of changing qualitatively. To determine if this effect was significant, we conducted chi-square goodness-of-fit tests in which the expected probability of selecting the qualitative change option (Segment B) or a non-qualitative change option (Segment A or Segment C) was equal—the null being a 50% chance of choosing Segment B and a 50% chance of choosing either Segment A or Segment C. This analysis offered a conservative test of our prediction (see also Bechler et al., 2019), because choice share for Segment B would have to exceed 50% overall to obtain a significant effect, despite there being three possible targets.

This analysis revealed that the choice distribution differed from chance, $\chi^2(1) = 36.30$, $p < .001$, $w = 0.35$, indicating that participants were more likely to select Segment B (the segment most likely to change qualitatively) than Segments A or C (the segments less likely to change qualitatively). We conducted an alternative analysis comparing the observed pattern to expected probabilities of 33% for each target, and found that the distribution differed from chance in this analysis as

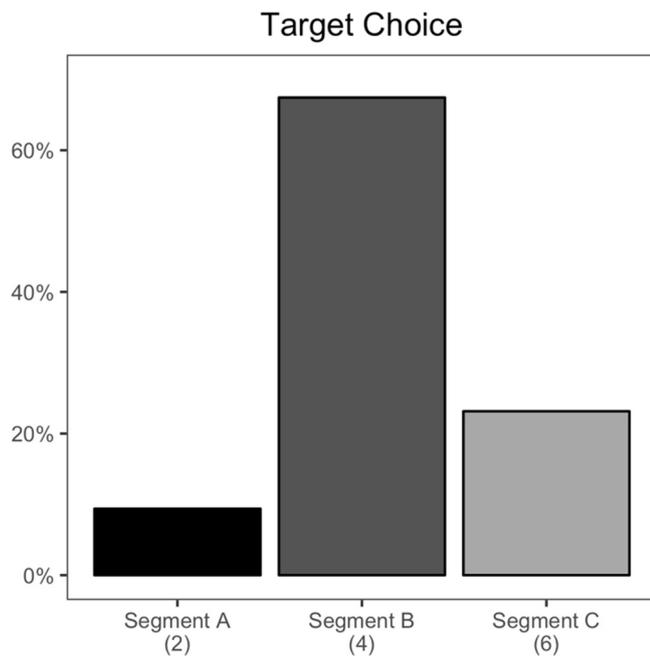


Fig. 1. Percent of participants choosing each segment in Experiment 1.

well, $\chi^2(2) = 164.54, p < .001, w = 0.74$.

4.3. Discussion

Experiment 1 offered an initial demonstration of the role of qualitative change expectations in guiding persuasion target selection. As hypothesized, persuaders were most inclined to target people whose attitudes were poised to change in valence following the persuasion attempt. Testing our hypothesis in a context in which persuaders lacked information regarding how much change they could create provided a useful demonstration of the effect, because persuaders often lack this information in the real world. They might have clear insight into where potential targets currently stand, but lack precise knowledge about the degree of change they can elicit. Experiment 1 simulated these conditions. At the same time, it is likely that persuaders do often have some sense of their own persuasiveness or the strength of their message based on prior experience, market research, pilot testing, and so on, and it is important to test the predicted effect in a context in which we can identify and control the precise degree of change at stake. Experiment 2 was designed with this and other goals in mind.

5. Experiment 2

This experiment had two primary aims. First, we sought to provide an even more direct test of the effect of qualitative versus non-qualitative change on target selection. Specifically, participants were asked to make a decision about whom they would target with a persuasive message: people they could shift from very negative to less negative, people they could shift from somewhat negative to somewhat positive, or people they could shift from somewhat positive to very positive. Unlike Experiment 1, we made the objective degree of change both explicit and constant across targets by describing the exact change that would occur on a numerical rating scale. We expected to replicate Experiment 1, such that participants would be more likely to target people who were poised to change qualitatively (from negative to positive) rather than non-qualitatively (from negative to less negative or positive to more positive).

Second, we aimed to provide initial evidence for the psychological mechanism driving this effect. As described earlier, we postulate that target selection is guided, at least in part, by the perception that

qualitative change is larger in magnitude and behavioral impact (Bechler et al., 2019). We assessed this account in Experiment 2. We also tested an alternative account related to atypicality. Specifically, one could argue that in addition to or instead of perceived magnitude and impact, target selection is driven by the perceived *atypicality* of the change in question. Maybe people pursue qualitative change because it seems uncommon or unusual to create such change, making qualitative change seem like a more unique opportunity. If so, perceived atypicality could prove more critical to target selection than perceived magnitude. Alternatively, if a high degree of change seems less common than a low degree of change, perhaps atypicality is linked to perceived magnitude.

To provide insight into these issues, we assessed perceived magnitude and impact as well as atypicality in Experiment 2. Although it is reasonable to surmise that qualitative change might be perceived as less common than some forms of non-qualitative change, we suspected that atypicality would fail to provide a viable account for two reasons. First, Experiment 1 offered a test of the predicted effect in a context in which atypicality would not provide a compelling account. Because we did not describe the attitude change one could bring about in that experiment, we also did not describe a rare or uncommon form of change. We only provided information about targets' initial attitudes, and surely people encounter others who are moderately opposed to their position with some frequency in the real world. Second, as explained earlier, the attitude strength literature suggests that extreme attitudes tend to be more stable and resistant to attack than moderate attitudes, meaning attitude change when initial extremity is high (e.g., from very negative to less negative) might be observed less frequently than attitude change when initial extremity is low (e.g., from somewhat negative to somewhat positive or somewhat positive to very positive). Accordingly, we expected participants to view change from very negative to less negative as most atypical, while targeting change from somewhat negative to somewhat positive, which seems greater in magnitude and impact.

To provide a test of these accounts in Experiment 2, we assigned participants to one of three conditions. In the first, participants selected a persuasion target—that is, they indicated whom they would target with an advertisement, much like in Experiment 1. They did not complete process measures. In the other conditions, we assessed the process accounts. More specifically, in one condition we asked participants about the magnitude and behavioral impact of the attitude change described. In the other, we asked participants about the atypicality of the change described. In neither of these latter conditions did participants select a persuasion target. By splitting participants into these conditions, we sought an uncontaminated view of how people choose targets and perceive the magnitude, impact, and atypicality of attitude change, allowing each measure to stand alone and reducing potential consistency biases among them. Our primary interest was in the target selection pattern and which of the two potential accounts more closely resembled it. If the magnitude and impact (atypicality) results better matched the targeting outcome, that would point to magnitude and impact (atypicality) as the more viable account.

5.1. Method

A total of 609 participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk took part for monetary compensation. A sensitivity analysis revealed 80% power to detect an effect size of $w = 0.20$ using the analysis we conducted in this experiment.

Participants encountered a scenario similar to that of Experiment 1, in which they were introduced to three consumer segments, one of which could be targeted with an advertisement. However, we made several key modifications. First, to establish the robustness of the effect, participants in Experiment 2 assumed the role of an employee working in marketing at United Airlines (instead of Wells Fargo). Second, in case describing recent bad press inadvertently steered participants toward qualitative change in Experiment 1 (so that they could move targets

from negative to positive and solve the specific crisis we had described), we removed that description and described no such crisis in Experiment 2. Third, in case there were aspects of the advertisement we showed in Experiment 1 that seemed uniquely appropriate for targets who were somewhat negative, we did not show participants a specific message or advertisement in Experiment 2.

Also important, to control for the objective amount of change participants believed they could effect, we specified the exact degree of change they could generate in Experiment 2. Participants were informed that based on data from focus groups, the advertisement they had would shift customers' attitudes in each segment 2 points up (or more favorable) on a scale ranging from 1 to 9, where 1 meant "extremely dislike," 9 meant "extremely like," and 5 meant "neutral" toward United Airlines. If participants targeted Segment A, they would shift the average customer attitude from a 2 ("dislike a lot") to a 4 ("dislike less"). If participants targeted Segment B, they would shift the average customer attitude from a 4 ("somewhat dislike") to a 6 ("somewhat like"). If participants targeted Segment C, they would shift the average customer attitude from a 6 ("somewhat like") to an 8 ("like more"). Thus, Segment B represented the qualitative change option; Segments A and C represented the non-qualitative change options.

Following this information, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions, designed to tap into participants' targeting decision and process. In the *target choice* condition, participants were simply asked: "Which segment would you choose to target with the advertisement?" In the *magnitude and impact* condition, participants were asked which segment's attitude change would be largest in magnitude and behavioral impact ("Which segment's attitude toward United Airlines would shift the most based on the points made in the advertisement?"; "Which segment's attitude shift would result in the largest shift in future behavior?"). In the *atypicality* condition, participants were asked which segment's attitude change would be the most uncommon and the most unusual ("Which segment's attitude shift would be the most uncommon?"; "Which segment's attitude shift would be the most unusual?"). Participants in the latter two conditions did not make targeting decisions. For all questions, participants selected Segment A, B, or C in a forced choice format.

5.2. Results

As illustrated in Fig. 2, participants assigned to make a targeting decision were most likely to select Segment B, the group whose attitude would change qualitatively. This pattern was also observed in the magnitude and impact condition—participants indicated that Segment B's attitude and future behavior change would be greatest—but not in the atypicality condition, in which participants indicated that Segment A's attitude change would be most uncommon and unusual. To determine if these effects were significant, we conducted chi-square goodness-of-fit tests as in Experiment 1, where the expected probability of selecting the predicted target or either of the other targets was equal. Again, this was a conservative test of our target choice prediction—the null was that there was a 50% chance of choosing the qualitatively changing target and a 50% chance of choosing either of the other targets. We also report alternative analyses comparing choice frequencies of the targets to expected probabilities of 33% each.

5.2.1. Target choice

In the target choice condition, 66.8% of participants reported that they would target Segment B, the segment that would change qualitatively. This choice distribution differed from chance, $\chi^2(1) = 23.22$, $p < .001$, $w = 0.34$, indicating that participants were more likely to select the segment that would change qualitatively than the segments that would not change qualitatively. For the alternative analysis comparing the observed pattern to expected probabilities of 33% for each target, we also found that the distribution differed from chance ($\chi^2(2) = 107.7$, $p < .001$, $w = 0.72$).

5.2.2. Perceived magnitude and impact of change

In the magnitude and impact condition, the results paralleled the target choice outcome. For the question assessing which segment's attitude would change the most if targeted, 65.0% selected Segment B. This distribution differed from chance, $\chi^2(1) = 18.00$, $p < .001$, $w = 0.30$, indicating that participants were more likely to select the segment that would change qualitatively than the segments that would not change qualitatively (33% each analysis: $\chi^2(2) = 96.13$, $p < .001$, $w = 0.69$). For the question assessing which segment's attitude change would result in the greatest behavior change, 62.5% selected Segment B. This choice distribution differed from chance, $\chi^2(1) = 12.50$, $p < .001$, $w = 0.25$, and again indicated that participants were more likely to select the segment that would change qualitatively than the segments that would not change qualitatively (33% each analysis: $\chi^2(2) = 91.75$, $p < .001$, $w = 0.68$).

5.2.3. Atypicality

In the atypicality condition, the results assumed a different form. For the question assessing which segment's attitude shift would be the most uncommon, the choice distribution differed from chance, $\chi^2(1) = 17.65$, $p < .001$, $w = 0.29$, but in this case just 35.3% of participants selected Segment B, meaning participants were more likely to select the segments that would change non-qualitatively (47.5% choosing Segment A, who would change from extreme to moderate dislike) than the segment that would change qualitatively (33% each analysis: $\chi^2(2) = 28.62$, $p < .001$, $w = 0.37$). For the question assessing which segment's attitude shift would be the most unusual, just 36.8% selected Segment B. This choice distribution also differed from chance, $\chi^2(1) = 14.29$, $p < .001$, $w = 0.26$; here too participants were more likely to select the segments that would change non-qualitatively (47.1% choosing Segment A) than the segment that would change qualitatively (33% each analysis: $\chi^2(2) = 30.26$, $p < .001$, $w = 0.39$).

5.3. Discussion

Experiment 2 replicated the key finding from Experiment 1 despite several procedural modifications. Most participants chose to target Segment B—the group whose attitudes would change qualitatively—even in the presence of explicit information indicating that each segment would shift the same degree if targeted. The robustness of this target selection effect (along with additional evidence for our theorized mechanism) was further revealed in Supplemental Studies 1–6. In those studies, we found that the effect was not constrained to the attitude scales used in Experiments 1 and 2 (e.g., see Supplemental Studies 1–3), that people believed that *others* would make similar decisions when choosing *their* advocacy targets (see Supplemental Studies 2–3), that people made similar advocacy decisions when the targets' potential change was in the negative direction (i.e., shifting down the scale; see Supplemental Study 3), that the effect replicated in different participant populations (see Supplemental Studies 4–5), and that the effect was amplified when persuaders believed they had a message that was strong enough to shift targets qualitatively (see Supplemental Study 6).

Most importantly, Experiment 2 also provided initial mechanism evidence. The results were consistent with the notion that target selection stemmed from the belief that both attitude and behavior change would be greater following a qualitative as opposed to non-qualitative shift. The results were inconsistent with the notion that target selection was driven by perceived atypicality—that is, the belief that qualitative change is unusual or uncommon. Based on the design of Experiment 2, in which participants completed the targeting measure, the magnitude and impact measures, or the atypicality measures, we obtained a clean view of each outcome, uncontaminated by consistency pressures or other response biases that might have emerged had we placed these measures together. The results revealed that the magnitude and impact data closely followed the target selection results, whereas the atypicality data did not.

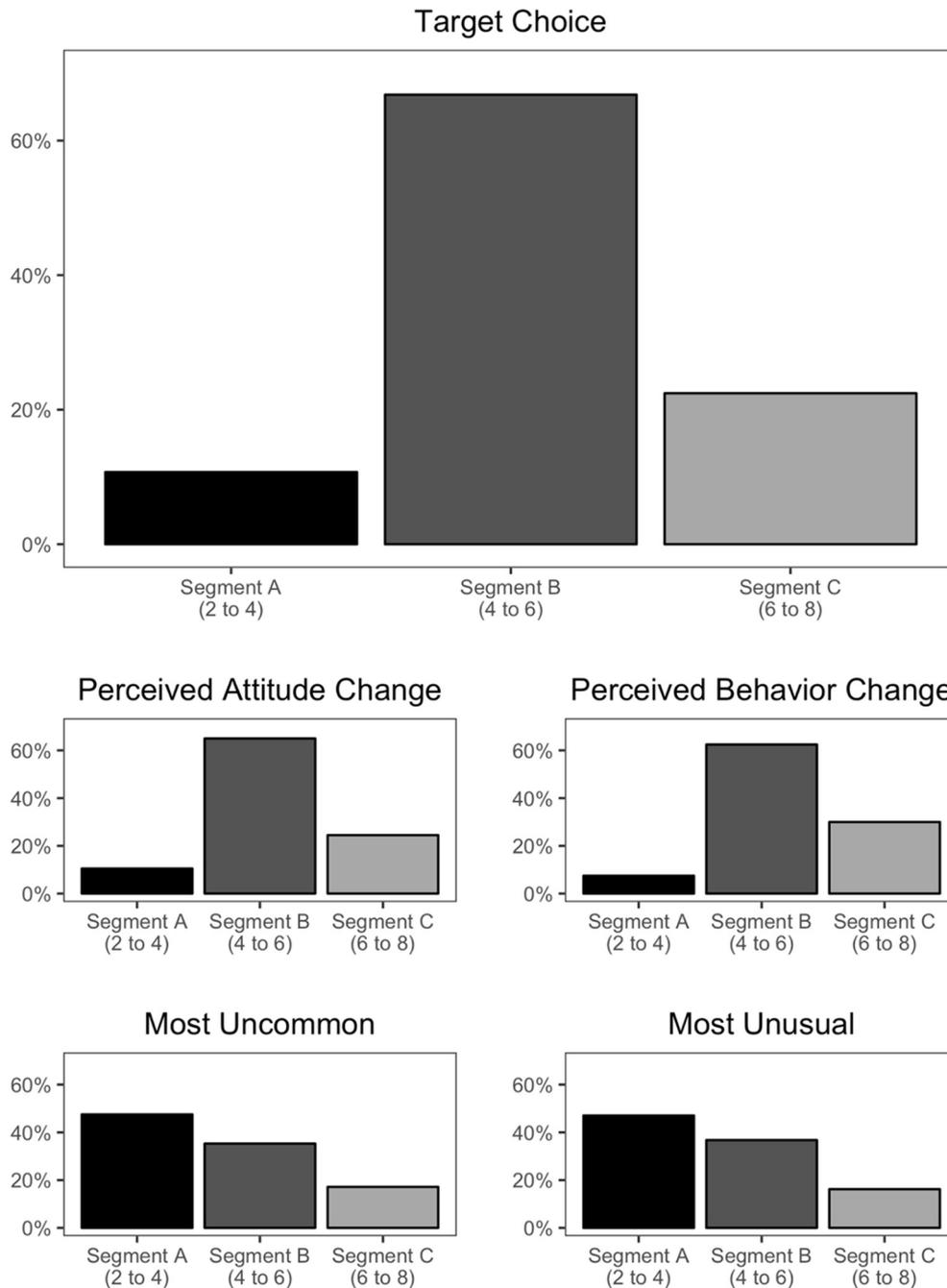


Fig. 2. Results from Experiment 2. Top panel: Choice distribution for participants indicating whom they would target with the advertisement. Middle panels: Choice distribution for participants indicating whose attitude and behavior would change the most if targeted. Bottom panels: Choice distribution for participants indicating whose attitude change would be the most uncommon and unusual.

Interestingly, the results from the atypicality condition suggest that people might have some intuition around the notion of attitude strength and receptiveness to persuasive messages (see [Krosnick & Petty, 1995](#)), but that intuition does not guide their target selection. Indeed, participants indicated that the most unusual and uncommon scenario would be the one in which individuals with extreme opposition changed their attitudes, followed by those with moderate opposition, followed by those with moderate support for the attitude object. In other words, participants seemed to intuit that the more opposed the target, the less likely a positive message would be to cause attitude change. We follow up on this observation and assess participants' intuitions about the receptiveness of potential persuasion targets in Experiment 3.

Of course, Experiment 2 is not without limitation. First, as in

Experiment 1, we relied on a within-participant joint-evaluation paradigm to test target selection. The goal was to be consistent with real life persuasion contexts in which persuaders can or even must choose among different targets. It was useful to test the effect in this context, but the design choice does introduce potential ambiguity. For example, because we presented multiple targets that varied along one primary dimension, we might have introduced demand concerns by making our research question transparent. Moreover, given that all three targets were displayed simultaneously, with the predicted target choice in the middle, we might have steered participants toward the qualitative change target as a result of a “middle option bias” ([Mochon & Frederick, 2011](#)) or because that target represented a compromise option ([Simonson, 1989](#)). As a second general limitation, because we measured

targeting decisions and the perceived magnitude and behavioral impact of change in separate conditions, we were unable to conduct a formal test of mediation. To address these issues, Experiment 3 employed a between-participants paradigm, randomly assigning participants to consider one of three different targets, and we measured both targeting and perceived change and impact in each condition to permit a formal test of mediation.

6. Experiment 3

In Experiment 3, we changed the scenario and assigned participants to one of three conditions in which they indicated their likelihood of trying to persuade a target whose attitude would change from negative to less negative, negative to positive, or positive to more positive. We hypothesized that participants would be most likely to advocate to the target whose attitude would change from negative to positive, and we expected this effect to be mediated by the perception that this change is greater in magnitude and behavioral impact. As discussed earlier, [Bechler et al. \(2019\)](#) found that the qualitative change effect itself—whereby qualitative change seems larger than non-qualitative change—was mediated by ease of processing. Again, the notion was that qualitative change is easier to detect and understand than non-qualitative change, and this ease augments the apparent magnitude of change. In the current research, we built on this premise and examined perceived change and behavioral impact as the more proximal drivers of advocacy intentions. We postulated that people would be more likely to target individuals who would change qualitatively, and we expected this effect to be linked at least partly to the perception that qualitative change is greater in magnitude and impact.

As in Experiment 2, this experiment also pits two potential factors in target selection against each other. We predict that, all else equal, people gravitate toward valence shifts in selecting persuasion targets. However, it could also be that people gravitate toward those who seem most likely to be receptive to their message or position (see [Akhtar & Wheeler, 2016](#)). With information about only a single target (i.e., in our between-participants paradigm), people might select persuasion targets based on their perceived receptiveness, which could lead them to advocate to *proattitudinal* targets—targets leaning their way already who could be shifted to more extreme support. Indeed, as reviewed earlier, people have been found to be more receptive to proattitudinal than counterattitudinal messages (e.g., [Cacioppo & Petty, 1979](#); [Clark & Wegener, 2013](#); [Hart et al., 2009](#); [Petty & Cacioppo, 1979](#)) and to messages from similar rather than dissimilar others (e.g., [Mackie et al., 1990](#); [Mackie et al., 1992](#)). Perhaps persuaders have this intuition (the atypicality results from Experiment 2 suggest that they might) and view proattitudinal targets as likely to be receptive. If so, and if this perception overwhelms the preference to shift a target's valence, the effect from Experiments 1 and 2 might disappear when people encounter a single target. In contrast, if qualitative change is the more salient feature, as we hypothesize, participants should continue to be most likely to target individuals poised to shift in valence.

6.1. Method

6.1.1. Participants and design

A total of 597 participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk took part for monetary compensation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three change conditions: negative to less negative, negative to positive, or positive to more positive. A sensitivity analysis revealed 80% power to detect a direct effect of size $d = 0.25$ using the analysis we conducted in this experiment.

6.1.2. Procedure

Participants read about a scenario in which they were coordinating a campaign for a political candidate. They had a campaign message that could move voters' opinions, but given financial and time constraints

they could only target one type of voter. Participants then received information about Frank, who was typical of one type of voter. They saw Frank's current attitude toward the candidate on a scale ranging from -50 to $+50$, where -50 meant "strongly opposed," $+50$ meant "strongly in favor," and 0 meant "neutral," and they were informed that Frank's attitude would shift 12 points up (i.e., more favorable) if he were targeted with the message. After reading the scenario, participants completed measures gauging their likelihood of targeting voters like Frank, their perceptions of Frank's behavior change, their perceptions of the degree of Frank's attitude change, and their perceptions of how receptive voters like Frank would be.

6.1.3. Change condition

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three change conditions: negative to positive (i.e., qualitative change), negative to less negative, and positive to more positive. In the negative to positive condition, participants were informed that Frank was " -6 (somewhat opposed)" to the candidate, but that he would shift to " $+6$ (somewhat in favor)" if he received the message. In the other conditions, participants were informed that Frank was " -18 (pretty opposed)" but would shift to " -6 (less opposed)" if he received the message (negative to less negative condition), or that Frank was " $+6$ (somewhat in favor)" but would shift to " $+18$ (more in favor)" if he received the message (positive to more positive condition).

6.1.4. Dependent measures

6.1.4.1. Likelihood of advocating. Two questions assessed participants' likelihood of targeting people like Frank: "Would you target potential voters like Frank or target another type of potential voter?" and, "How likely would you be to target people like Frank with the campaign message?" ($r[595] = 0.90$, $p < .001$). Responses were provided on scales ranging from 1 to 9; higher values represented greater likelihood of targeting people like Frank.

6.1.4.2. Perceived behavior change. Next, participants were instructed to assume that they did decide to target voters like Frank and that these voters did shift in the way described. They then answered two questions, on 1–9 scales: "How likely is it that the change in these voters' views will affect their future behavior (e.g., who they vote for, whether they vote)?" and, "How much does the change in these voters' views mean their behavior will change as well?" ($r[595] = 0.80$, $p < .001$). Higher values represented greater behavior change.

6.1.4.3. Perceived attitude change. Then, operating under the same assumptions, participants responded to two questions tapping perceived attitude change: "How much change did the campaign message cause in these voters' views?" and, "How persuaded are these voters by the campaign message?" ($r[595] = 0.85$, $p < .001$). Higher values represented greater change.

6.1.4.4. Perceived receptiveness. Last, two items assessed participants' perceptions that voters like Frank would be open and receptive to a positive message about the candidate ($r[595] = 0.81$, $p < .001$). Higher values represented greater receptiveness.

6.2. Results

We submitted each index to a one-way ANOVA with change condition as the independent variable. Means and standard deviations are presented in [Table 1](#).

6.2.1. Likelihood of advocating

We found a significant effect of change condition on likelihood of targeting people like Frank, $F(2, 594) = 49.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.14$ ($d = 0.81$). Participants were more likely to target people like Frank when he would change from negative to positive compared to when he

Table 1

Dependent variable measures in Experiment 3. Subscripts should be interpreted within rows only. Values with the same subscript do not differ from each other at a $p < .05$ level.

| Dependent variables as a function of change condition in Experiment 3 | | | |
|---|---------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Dependent measures | Change condition | | |
| | Negative to less negative | Negative to positive | Positive to more positive |
| Likelihood of advocating | | | |
| <i>M</i> | 4.87 _a | 6.94 _b | 6.22 _c |
| <i>SD</i> | 2.32 | 1.92 | 2.01 |
| Perceived behavior change | | | |
| <i>M</i> | 4.63 _a | 6.24 _b | 5.85 _c |
| <i>SD</i> | 2.17 | 1.54 | 1.77 |
| Perceived attitude change | | | |
| <i>M</i> | 5.25 _a | 6.84 _b | 6.26 _c |
| <i>SD</i> | 1.90 | 1.50 | 1.73 |
| Perceived receptiveness | | | |
| <i>M</i> | 4.42 _a | 5.45 _b | 6.52 _c |
| <i>SD</i> | 2.12 | 1.83 | 1.49 |

would change from negative to less negative, $t(594) = -9.84$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.97$, or from positive to more positive, $t(594) = -3.46$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.37$. Participants were also more likely to target people like Frank when he would change from positive to more positive compared to when he would change from negative to less negative, $t(594) = -6.43$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.62$.

6.2.2. Perceived behavior change

There was a significant effect on perceived behavior change, $F(2, 594) = 41.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.12$ ($d = 0.74$). Change from negative to positive was perceived as implying greater change in future behavior than was change from negative to less negative, $t(594) = -8.69$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.86$, or change from positive to more positive, $t(594) = -2.12$, $p = .034$, $d = -0.24$. Participants also believed change from positive to more positive implied greater future behavior change than change from negative to less negative, $t(594) = -6.61$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.62$.

6.2.3. Perceived attitude change

There was a significant effect on perceived attitude change, $F(2, 594) = 43.50$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.13$ ($d = 0.77$). Change from negative to positive was perceived as larger in magnitude than change from negative to less negative, $t(594) = -9.22$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.93$, or from positive to more positive, $t(594) = -3.38$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.36$. Participants also perceived change from positive to more positive as larger in magnitude than change from negative to less negative, $t(594) = -5.89$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.56$.

6.2.4. Perceived receptiveness

Last, there was a significant effect on perceived receptiveness, $F(2, 594) = 65.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.18$ ($d = 0.94$). As expected, these results followed a different pattern: The more positive Frank's initial attitude was, the more receptive participants believed voters like him would be to a positive message. Receptiveness was perceived as greater in the positive to more positive condition than in the negative to positive condition, $t(594) = -5.84$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.64$, and negative to less negative condition, $t(594) = -11.43$, $p < .001$, $d = -1.15$. Participants also perceived greater receptiveness in the negative to positive condition than in the negative to less negative condition, $t(594) = -5.59$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.52$.

6.2.5. Mediation

We conducted a bootstrapped serial mediation analysis, contrast

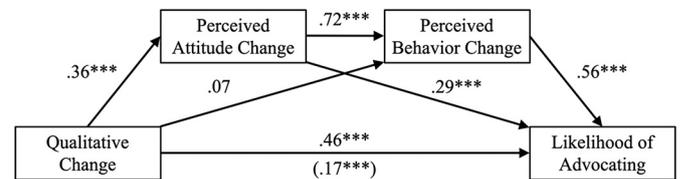


Fig. 3. Mediation analysis in Experiment 3 for the comparison of the qualitative change condition to the two non-qualitative change conditions (controlling for the comparison between the two non-qualitative change conditions). The path coefficients are unstandardized betas. The value in parenthesis indicates the effect of change condition on likelihood of advocating when controlling for the mediators. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

coding our multicategorical independent variable (Hayes & Preacher, 2014). The first contrast compared the qualitative change condition to the two non-qualitative change conditions; the second compared the two non-qualitative change conditions. Our primary interest was in the mediation test for the first contrast controlling for the second. This analysis indicated that advocacy likelihood was mediated, at least in part, by perceived attitude change and perceived behavior change (95% CI = [0.10, 0.20]; Fig. 3). As a secondary observation, the same mediation pathway using the second contrast controlling for the first was also significant (95% CI = [0.12, 0.29]).

6.3. Discussion

Despite numerous procedural modifications (e.g., moving the focal test to a between- rather than within-participants design, shifting the key outcome from a forced-choice test to a continuous measure of targeting likelihood, changing the scale along which targets' attitudes were described [from 1 to 9 in Experiment 2 to -50 to $+50$ in Experiment 3], and altering the scenario to use an abstract political context), Experiment 3 conceptually replicated the findings from Experiments 1 and 2. Participants were more likely to advocate to targets who were poised to change qualitatively rather than non-qualitatively. Mediation results were consistent with our hypothesis that this effect stemmed, at least in part, from the fact that qualitative attitude change was perceived to be greater in magnitude and behavioral impact. As discussed earlier, Bechler et al. (2019) found that processing ease mediated the effect of qualitative change on perceived magnitude and behavioral impact. Experiment 3 built on this insight to shed light on the process driving targeting decisions. Although multiple mediation models could be fit to the data, we focused our analysis on the predicted model suggesting that persuaders target qualitative change because it seems bigger and more impactful. The results were compatible with this hypothesis.

In addition to replicating the hypothesized effect and providing evidence for the mechanism driving it, we ruled out competing accounts. First, the between-participants nature of Experiment 3 reduces concerns about demand characteristics and eliminates accounts pertaining to middle-option or compromise biases. Furthermore, the effects do not stem from perceptions of who would be most receptive to one's message. Receptiveness was believed to be greatest when the message was most proattitudinal—that is, when the target's initial attitude was most aligned with the message. Thus, persuaders' preference for advocating to targets who would change qualitatively emerged despite their recognition that other targets would be more receptive. Combining the insights from Experiments 2 and 3, the allure of qualitative change does not seem to reflect a sense of which type of change would be most atypical (Experiment 2), nor which type of target would be most receptive (Experiment 3). Rather, persuaders' preference to target someone who would change qualitatively reflects an underlying perception that qualitative change is greater in magnitude and behavioral impact.

7. Experiment 4

Experiments 1–3 suggest that persuaders are more likely to select targets poised to change qualitatively rather than non-qualitatively. As outlined earlier, we argue that this strategy might be suboptimal in at least some instances. Message positioning research suggests that counterattitudinal messages trigger greater resistance than do proattitudinal messages, and qualitative attitude change requires counterattitudinal persuasion by definition. Likewise, attitude strength research suggests that shifting someone in attitude extremity (e.g., from moderately to extremely positive) might be more likely to impact behavior than shifting someone in attitude valence, assuming the change in valence moves the target from one moderate position to another. Taken together, these literatures hint at the notion that the optimal targets for persuasion might often be those who are already leaning, but just moderately so, in the direction of the persuader's message or position. Indeed, such targets could prove most open to attitude change and most likely to display a corresponding shift in behavior, resulting in greater persuasive impact if targeted. Experiment 4 investigated this possibility.

This experiment consisted of two parts. In Part 1, participants reported their attitudes toward 29 candidates for U.S. President in the 2020 election (as listed on the New York Times Website on May 16, 2019; Burns, Flegenheimer, Lee, Lerer, & Martin, 2019) on scales ranging from 1 (extremely against) to 9 (extremely in favor), with a neutral midpoint of 5. We then invited participants who reported attitudes of 2, 4, 6, 8, or 9 toward candidate Joseph R. Biden Jr. to complete Part 2 (run from May 17–30, 2019). In Part 2, all participants read a pro-Biden message. Participants with attitudes of 8 or 9 constituted our persuaders. These participants were offered an opportunity to send the pro-Biden message to one of the remaining groups of participants (i.e., those with attitudes of 2, 4, or 6). Participants with attitudes of 2, 4, or 6 constituted our targets. Targets read the pro-Biden message and then completed items measuring the message's persuasive impact. We hypothesized that persuaders would be most likely to send the message to targets with an attitude of 4 (replicating our previous findings), but that targets with attitudes of 6 would show evidence of greater persuasive impact (e.g., attitude and behavior change) after reading it.

In addition to providing a test of whether people sometimes err in choosing persuasion targets they believe they can flip from one valence to another, this experiment also tests the current hypotheses in a real persuasion context in which participants made actual persuasion decisions. Experiments 1–3 asked participants to imagine working for Wells Fargo, United Airlines, and a political advocacy group, and demonstrated the effect across contexts, but in each case targeting decisions were clearly hypothetical. Experiment 4 asked participants about a real attitude object of importance to them personally (U.S. Presidential candidate Joe Biden), had participants make real persuasion decisions (i.e., to whom they would send an actual message promoting Joe Biden), and actually tested the effect of this message on potential targets. Thus, this study used a topic of consequence and assessed real targeting decisions and outcomes.

7.1. Method

7.1.1. Participants and design

A total of 1500 participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk completed Part 1 of the experiment for monetary compensation. Of these, 743 participants (293 persuaders; 450 targets [114 with attitudes of 2, 123 with attitudes of 4, and 213 with attitudes of 6]) qualified for Part 2, and 636 (253 persuaders; 383 targets [94 with attitudes of 2, 100 with attitudes of 4, and 189 with attitudes of 6]) completed Part 2. Sensitivity analyses revealed 80% power to detect an effect size of $w = 0.18$ for the advocacy effect, and 80% power to detect an effect of size $d = 0.32$ for the effect of the message's persuasive impact.

7.1.2. Procedure

In Part 1, participants reported their attitudes toward 29 candidates for U.S. President as of May 16, 2019. For each candidate, participants were asked, "What is your attitude toward [candidate name] ([candidate party])?" Responses to each question were provided on a scale ranging from 1 (extremely against) to 9 (extremely in favor), with a "neutral" midpoint of 5. Although we assessed attitudes toward all 29 candidates, our interest was in attitudes toward Democratic Party candidate Joe Biden. Participants who reported attitudes toward Joe Biden of 2, 4, 6, 8, or 9 were invited to return for Part 2 of the study.

In Part 2, the procedure varied based on participants' attitudes toward Joe Biden in Part 1. Participants with attitudes of 8 or 9 were highly favorable toward Biden and served as persuaders—that is, those who would make a targeting decision. These participants were informed that while many workers on Mechanical Turk had similar attitudes toward the 2020 presidential candidates, there was a wide range of views of each candidate, and particularly so for Joe Biden. Persuaders were informed that they would have an opportunity to send a brief pro-Biden message to one of these other participants. They then read the message, which contained excerpts from an actual pro-Biden article written by NBC News political commentator Ashley Pratte (2019; see Supplemental materials), and selected a target to whom they would send the message. More specifically, participants read that Part 1 of our survey revealed that attitudes of 2, 4, and 6 toward Joe Biden were common in our sample, and that they could select which type of participant they would like to send the message supporting Biden. Our aim was to examine how people select persuasion targets while avoiding activating any particular persuasion goal (e.g., to flip, moderate, or polarize targets). Hence, we asked participants to whom they would send the message, but did not focus them on any specific persuasion outcome.

Participants with attitudes of 2, 4, or 6 served as targets in Part 2. These participants were informed that they would read a brief message that was sent to them by another worker on Mechanical Turk about why people should support Joe Biden. After reading the message, targets completed items measuring the message's impact.

7.1.3. Dependent measures

7.1.3.1. Target choice. After reading the message, persuaders responded to one measure assessing which type of participant they would target with the message: "If you could send this message to try to persuade someone, to whom would you send the message you just read?" They were presented with three options: "A participant with an attitude of 2," "A participant with an attitude of 4," and "A participant with an attitude of 6."

7.1.3.2. Persuasive impact. After reading the message, targets completed a measure of persuasive impact. Specifically, targets were asked: "How much did reading that message change your attitude toward Joseph R. Biden Jr.?" and, "How much did reading that message impact the likelihood that you will support Joseph R. Biden Jr. in the 2020 election if he is the Democratic nominee for president?" Responses were provided on scales ranging from 1 ("Not at all") to 9 ("A great deal"), and were averaged to create a composite index ($r[381] = 0.85, p < .001$).

These items, adapted from past research (e.g., Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979), assessed self-reported change rather than actual Time 1 – Time 2 differences. We made an a priori decision to measure self-reported change in order to level the playing field and control for the amount of change we could possibly observe across targets. Indeed, on bounded attitude scales, ranging from 1 to 9 for example, a limit exists as to how much more favorable a given participant can become relative to their initial attitudes, and this limit varies depending on people's initial attitudes. For someone reporting a 6 on a 1–9 scale, the maximum observable change would be 3. For someone reporting a 4 or a 2, the maximum observable change would be 5 or 7, respectively. Thus, there

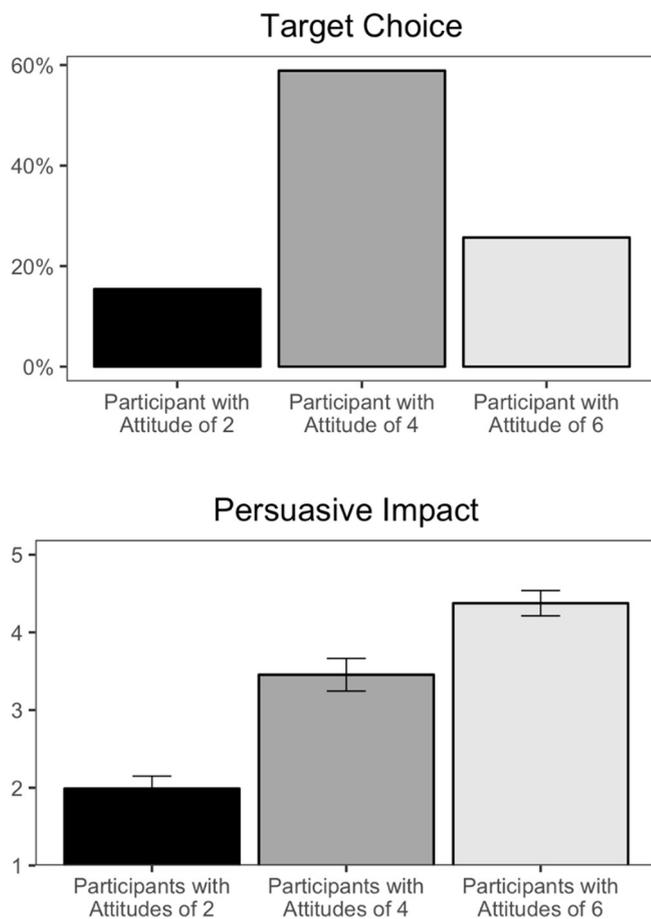


Fig. 4. Results from Experiment 4. Top panel: Percent of persuaders choosing each potential target. Bottom panel: Persuasive impact as reported by targets.

is more or less room to change, depending on what one's Time 1 attitude is, which lends ambiguity to any comparison of the amount of persuasive impact the 2s, 4s, and 6s in our sample would display if a Time 1 – Time 2 difference measure were used. To address this issue and offer a fair comparison of persuasive impact across targets, we relied on direct self-report assessments that avoided placing stricter limits on some targets than on others.

7.2. Results

7.2.1. Target choice

To assess persuaders' targeting decisions (i.e., to whom they decided to send the pro-Biden message), we conducted the same chi-square goodness-of-fit tests as in Experiments 1 and 2, where the expected probability of selecting the predicted target or either of the other two targets was equal. Replicating our earlier findings, 58.9% of persuaders reported that they would target a “participant with an attitude of 4” (the target most likely to change qualitatively). This choice distribution differed from chance, $\chi^2(1) = 8.00, p = .005, w = 0.18$ (33% each analysis: $\chi^2(2) = 78.39, p < .001, w = 0.56$; Fig. 4).

7.2.2. Persuasive impact

To assess targets' reactions to reading the pro-Biden message, we submitted the persuasive impact measure to a one-way ANOVA with initial attitude (from Part 1: 2, 4, or 6) as the independent variable. This analysis revealed a significant difference in persuasive impact, $F(2, 380) = 42.28, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.18$ ($d = 0.94$). Targets whose initial attitude toward Joe Biden was a 6 (i.e., slightly favorable) reported being more impacted upon reading the message ($M = 4.38, SD = 2.24$) than did targets whose initial attitude was a 4 (i.e., slightly unfavorable;

$M = 3.46, SD = 2.10$), $t(380) = -3.62, p < .001, d = -0.42$, or a 2 (i.e., very unfavorable; $M = 1.99, SD = 1.56$), $t(380) = -9.18, p < .001, d = -1.17$. Also noteworthy, targets whose initial attitude toward Joe Biden was a 4 reported they were more impacted upon reading the message than did targets whose initial attitude was a 2, $t(380) = -4.95, p < .001, d = -0.79$.

7.3. Discussion

In Experiment 4, we replicated the core result from the earlier studies in showing that persuaders were more likely to select targets who seemed poised to change qualitatively (i.e., the 4s) rather than non-qualitatively (i.e., the 2s or 6s). In this study, we enhanced the ecological validity of our findings by assessing actual targeting decisions on a real attitude issue (Joe Biden's presidential candidacy). We also extended our findings by demonstrating that persuaders' targeting decisions can be suboptimal. As predicted by past research on message positioning and attitude strength, targets who were already leaning in persuaders' direction (i.e., the 6s) reported being most impacted by the message. In other words, targets were most receptive to proattitudinal messages, allowing those messages to have the most impact. Not surprisingly, targets were least receptive to extremely counterattitudinal messages; moderately counterattitudinal messages fell in between. This finding suggests that persuaders are likely correct in not targeting people extremely opposed to their views, but might at least sometimes limit their persuasive impact by targeting people moderately opposed to their views.

8. General discussion

Advocacy is a topic of increasing import in the attitudes literature. The current research was designed to answer an unexamined question in this domain: How do people select persuasion targets? We explored how the type of change people expect to bring about can shape target selection. We found that people are more likely to advocate when they believe they can create qualitative change—that is, when they believe their advocacy will produce a shift in attitude valence. This effect emerged reliably despite numerous procedural changes across experiments. We varied the attitude issue (e.g., Wells Fargo, United Airlines, Joe Biden), the scale along which targets' attitudes were described (1 to 9, -50 to $+50$), the experimental design (within- or between-participants), our measure of target selection (forced choice or self-reported likelihood), and whether we provided information about the expected degree of change. In each case, participants gravitated toward targets who seemed poised to shift in valence.

As hypothesized, this effect was mediated by the perception that change across valence is greater, in terms of magnitude and behavioral impact, than change within valence. That is, participants viewed qualitative change as larger and more impactful than non-qualitative change, and this perception predicted targeting decisions. Persuaders want to maximize their persuasive impact, and they target people who would shift in valence as a means of doing so. Past research (Bechler et al., 2019) suggests that qualitative change is easier for people to detect and understand than non-qualitative change, and this ease amplifies perceived magnitude. The current research builds on this premise to provide insight into persuasion target selection. Qualitative change is easier to process, seems greater, and is more alluring to persuaders.

As outlined earlier, we argue that the tendency to target qualitative change is at least sometimes suboptimal; that is, trying to convert people from one valence to another might not always yield maximum persuasive impact. Merging message positioning and attitude strength perspectives, we hypothesized that although persuaders tend to be most interested in creating qualitative change, they at least sometimes induce more attitude change and have more behavioral impact when they target people who are already leaning in their direction. In other words,

directing persuasion efforts to existing supporters might provide greater yield, or be more productive, than trying to convert people into supporters, akin to the conventional wisdom that marketing efforts can have the greatest utility when they target existing customers (e.g., Reichheld & Sasser Jr, 1990; Reichheld & Scheffer, 2000; Sargeant & Jay, 2004). Experiment 4 revealed both the desire to target qualitative change and the potential shortcomings of doing so. Voters who were highly favorable toward presidential candidate Joe Biden (8s and 9s on the 9-point attitude scale) were most likely to send a pro-Biden message to voters who were moderately opposed (4s), presumably to convert them to a supportive position. However, it was moderate supporters (6s) who reported being most impacted by reading that message. This finding suggests that persuaders' tendency to select targets they believe they can flip, or change qualitatively, can indeed be suboptimal in at least some cases.

8.1. Alternative explanations

In addition to documenting a novel effect in persuasion target selection and providing evidence for its mechanism, our experiments provide evidence against alternative accounts. Most notably, target selection was not driven by a perception that qualitative change is unusual or atypical, nor by a sense that moderately counterattitudinal targets (those targeted for qualitative change) are most receptive to persuasion. We eliminated these accounts in Experiments 2 and 3. Across studies, we also eliminated various accounts related to specific methodological choices (e.g., that the effect reflected a middle option bias or compromise strategy and would only emerge in a within-participants or joint-evaluation paradigm) by varying our stimuli, designs, and procedures in multiple ways.

One account we have yet to discuss is whether the target selection effect stems from the different approaches people might use to persuade targets with different attitudes. Perhaps people imagine using different strategies to persuade different targets, and prefer (or see as more effective) the strategy they would employ in the qualitative change case relative to non-qualitative change cases. Or maybe persuaders believe they would exert more effort when trying to shift targets qualitatively, and thus believe their persuasion attempt would have more impact under qualitative rather than non-qualitative conditions. Might these perceptions help drive target selection? Although it is reasonable to surmise that persuaders might adapt the content of their messages or overall persuasion strategy depending on their target, we know the effect is not limited to conditions under which they can do so. Indeed, we controlled for the content of the message persuaders could send their targets in Experiments 1 and 4 by providing that message and holding it constant across all participants. That we observed the predicted effect under these conditions suggests that tailored and preferred persuasion strategies are not crucial drivers of persuaders' attraction to qualitative change.

8.2. New questions and future directions

In addition to offering a first step toward understanding the factors that shape target selection in persuasion contexts, our findings spark new questions that warrant attention in future research. Below, we highlight what we see as some of the more pressing next steps.

8.2.1. Boundaries

First, our studies reliably demonstrate that persuaders target shifts across rather than within valence, but inevitably there will be circumstances in which this effect is reduced, eliminated, or reversed. As a starting point, persuaders' propensity to select targets who are most likely to change qualitatively could depend on the attitude object or issue, the goal of the persuasion attempt, and even the type of advocacy in question. For instance, if a health care professional's goal is to decrease the total number of teens who smoke, she might be most likely to

target teens who have slightly favorable attitudes toward smoking in an attempt to shift them to the negative side. However, if the goal is to reduce the prevalence of diseases associated with very heavy smoking, she might be more likely to target teens with the most positive attitudes toward smoking, because those are likely the heaviest smokers. Likewise, in high stakes purchase contexts (e.g., home or car shopping), persuaders might show different target selection patterns, recognizing that moving someone from moderately to very favorable may be necessary to promote the desired behavior. In future research, it would be useful to examine potential domain specificity of target selection effects.

The type of advocacy in question might also shape target selection. In prior work, advocacy motives have been construed in terms of both persuasion and sharing intentions (Cheatham & Tormala, 2015). Whereas persuasion intentions reflect the motivation to change people's attitudes to bring them closer to one's own, sharing intentions reflect a desire to simply express one's attitude, without seeking to change others' views. The preference to advocate to those who would shift in valence might be restricted to advocacy driven by persuasion intentions. When focused on mere sharing, or attitude expression, people might choose different targets. Perhaps people target likeminded others, for instance, when their goal is to share but not persuade. Exploring these moderators and related issues would be a natural next step for research in this domain.

8.2.2. Consequences of target selection

Finally, it also would be useful to explore downstream consequences of targeting decisions. One interesting outcome would be persuaders' satisfaction with the outcomes of their advocacy decisions. Given that the goal of persuasion is often to change others' attitudes and subsequent behaviors, persuaders are likely to feel more satisfied when they believe they have effected greater change in attitudes and behaviors. And given that people appear to see qualitative attitude change as greater and more impactful than non-qualitative change, persuaders might feel more satisfied when they cause others to change qualitatively rather than non-qualitatively—even if objectively they have had reduced persuasive impact. If true, persuaders might become increasingly likely to target qualitative change in future persuasion decisions following successful qualitative (as opposed to non-qualitative) change, thus doubling down on what Experiment 4 suggests can be a suboptimal strategy. Future research investigating this and other consequences of target selection would be worthwhile.

9. Conclusion

Whose attitudes do people try to change? Whose attitudes *should* people try to change? The current research provides an initial look at how people choose the targets of their persuasion, and demonstrates that target selections can be suboptimal. We found that people tend to select persuasion targets they believe they can change in valence, but might at least sometimes boost their persuasive impact by choosing targets who are already leaning in their direction. We hope researchers will be encouraged by our findings to dive deeper into the realm of advocacy behavior to shed further light on how people select persuasion targets, and what the downstream consequences of these targeting decisions might be.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2019.103911>.

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