Why Parties Can Benefit From Promoting Occupational Diversity in Legislatures: Experimental Evidence From Three Countries[*]

Abstract

How do legislators' occupational backgrounds shape their ability to advance policy? We argue that politicians with professional experience are perceived as more credible in their areas of expertise and can more effectively persuade voters and peers. We examine this argument in a series of experiments in three Western democracies. We find that German legislators with professional experience in education are more effective at persuading voters in that policy area. The same pattern holds for United States' legislators with experience in healthcare. The quality of the arguments does not substitute for professional background effects. These effects extend to elected officials: Swedish politicians are more likely to co-sponsor legislation proposed by peers with professional experience in that field. Parties that foster occupational diversity are better equipped to build support for their policy agendas. The study uncovers a new mechanism through which descriptive representation can influence policy outcomes, independent of legislators' preferences.

Keywords: Political Representation; Descriptive Representation; Professional Background; Expertise; Legislative Politics

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Parties and legislators often pursue unpopular policies. In response to an external shock, resource constraints, or new evidence, politicians and party leaders must regularly defend policy positions that voters oppose (Giger and Nelson, 2011; McGraw, 1990; Vis, 2009). Yet doing so is risky for politicians: unpopular policies may jeopardize their own (or their party's) chances of re-election, and may lead to noncompliance that thwarts the reform's goals (Simonov et al., 2020; Stokes, 2016). Politicians often try to avoid these risks by explaining their decisions and attempting to persuade voters to agree with them (Grose, Malhotra and Parks Van Houweling, 2015; McGraw, 1991). But how can *parties* build support for unpopular policies?

We argue that parties in legislatures can persuade voters and legislators to support their agenda by leveraging the occupational backgrounds of their rank-and-file members. Legislators with a professional background in a given domain are perceived as better informed, more experienced, and better able to deal with sector-specific issues (Alexiadou, Spaniel and Gunaydin, 2022; Coffé and Theiss-Morse, 2016). Professional background signals policymakers' qualifications and credibility to time-constrained voters (McDermott, 2005). We maintain that this credibility bonus granted to legislators with professional experience outside the legislature allows them to more effectively garner support for policies in their area of expertise.

We examine this argument in a series of survey experiments in three Western democracies – Germany, the United States (U.S.), and Sweden – and in different policy areas. The results reveal that both citizens and political elites perceive legislators with professional experience in a given area as more knowledgeable in that domain, regardless of the social status of the profession, the quality of the arguments advanced, or the legislator's partisan affiliation. Legislators with relevant occupational backgrounds are also more effective at persuading voters to support unpopular policies in their areas of expertise. Our results are robust across the political contexts and policy issues analyzed.

The effects among the mass public are sizeable. For example, while 27.5% of U.S. respondents supported a proposal to restrict telehealth services put forward by an average legislator (without reference to their professional background), 33.8% did so when told the proposal came from a

legislator who also works as a general physician. We find a similar effect for Swedish elected officials. Professional background cues also increase the likelihood that other legislators will co-sponsor a proposed bill. This effect is mainly driven by co-partisan legislators. Finally, we find some evidence that legislators with an appropriate professional background are better equipped to unilaterally push their proposals in the legislature without experiencing a backlash from voters or (co-partisan) peers. This result suggests that occupational background cues not only help legislators build support for their proposals; they can also shape the policymaking process.

Our study joins an emerging strand of research on public attitudes toward technocracy (Bertsou, 2022; Caramani, 2017; Centeno, 1993). Prior studies indicate how individuals who support technocratic representation overlap somewhat with those who have populist attitudes but tend to be more educated, more moderate, and display a greater interest in politics (Bertsou and Caramani, 2022; Fernández-Vázquez, Lavezzolo and Ramiro, 2023). These attitudes drive preferences toward bureaucratic decision-making. Voters tend to be more receptive to policy proposals from unelected technocrats or foreign policy advisors who have military experience (Kenwick and Maxey, 2022; Vittori et al., 2023).

Our findings establish that politicians can leverage their expertise to build support for new policies. This result has important implications for party leaders' strategic considerations when encouraging potential candidates to run for office. By diversifying the professional backgrounds of their rank-and-file members, party leaders will be better prepared to defend and build support for reforms in different policy areas. This study thus also contributes to scholarship on the substantive effects of descriptive representation. Prior work indicates that politicians with experience in business are more likely to prioritize investments in economic infrastructure (Szakonyi, 2020) and to appoint economic policymakers (Hallerberg and Wehner, 2020). Other studies show that electorally insecure parties employ strategic descriptive representation by advancing more women candidates to bolster their support among women (Weeks et al., 2023). Moreover, legislators with a working-class background are more likely to represent the interests of working-class voters (Carnes, 2013; O'Grady, 2019; Barnes, Beall and Holman, 2021). Our research demonstrates

that these effects can occur not only as a result of differences in legislators' preferences or policy priorities, but also due to the unique ability of legislators with different occupational backgrounds to build support for new policies in their areas of expertise, both inside and outside the legislature.

How legislators' backgrounds can influence policy outcomes

It is well established in the literature on political representation that diversity within legislatures influences policy outcomes.[1] For instance, women legislators prioritize different issues than their male counterparts, and redistribute resources according to these priorities (Bratton and Ray, 2002; Hessami and da Fonseca, 2020; Homola, 2022; Wängnerud, 2009). The same is true for elected officials with different social backgrounds (Carnes, 2013; O'Grady, 2019) or who have experience in different industries (Szakonyi, 2020). These substantive effects of descriptive representation are often attributed to differences in policy preferences and priorities.

However, the same effects can be observed even absent differences in legislators' preferences or priorities. For example, there is evidence that legislators' social and individual backgrounds shape their perceptions of the electorate, which can lead them to prioritize different policies even if they are not intentionally trying to represent a particular subconstituency (Pereira, 2021; Pilet et al., 2023). While this evidence comes from Europe, there are reasons to believe the same patterns hold in the U.S., where the vast majority of members of Congress and state legislatures have an affluent background and similar professional experiences before taking office (Bonica, 2020; Makse, 2019).

We propose an alternative mechanism through which legislators' backgrounds can influence policy outcomes: politicians with various occupational backgrounds may be more effective at building support for policies in their areas of expertise. If this is the case, descriptive representation can influence policy outcomes even if different legislators share the same policy preferences or priorities.

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[1]We focus on substantive policy outcomes, but descriptive representation can also influence a range of relevant non-policy outcomes including candidate quality, voter turnout, and career paths in politics (Besley et al., 2017; Griffin and Keane, 2006; O'Brien and Rickne, 2016).

Legislators' occupational backgrounds and persuasiveness

Voters often rely on cues based on gender, race, or other background characteristics to evaluate candidates and politicians (Carnes and Lupu, 2016; Eshima and Smith, 2022; Schwarz and Coppock, 2022). There is ample evidence that the personal and social backgrounds of political candidates influence voters' preferences. Different features of candidates and officials – including their professional background – can affect perceptions of their competence, warmth, or ideology. For instance, Campbell and Cowley (2014) find a positive effect in favor of candidates with a science degree, relative to career politicians, in a candidate choice experiment. These effects, however, may depend on candidates' policy positions or type of occupation (Pedersen, Dahlgaard and Citi, 2019).

Legislators may also be able to leverage their professional background to garner support for new policies in their areas of expertise. Politicians with relevant professional experience may be more persuasive in particular policy areas because they may be more familiar with the complexities of the issue, the different stakeholders, and with potential solutions adopted elsewhere, enabling them to communicate with expertise and clarity. For example, a legislator with a medical degree can clarify technical healthcare-related policy issues for both the public and lawmakers. They may have direct insights into healthcare systems that allow them to explain how policies might affect patients and providers, making them influential in promoting related policies. This proficiency may give legislators with a professional background outside politics a credibility premium in their area of expertise.

This argument is consistent with prior work on voting behavior and representation. Candidates with a professional background in a given domain are perceived as better informed, more experienced, and better qualified to deal with sector-specific issues (Campbell and Cowley, 2014; Coffé and Theiss-Morse, 2016; McDermott, 2005). This credibility bonus does not only affect voters: legislators are also more likely to take cues from peers with expertise in a given domain (Fong, 2020). Investors have also been found to rely on occupational cues to assess the credibility and qualifications of ministerial appointments (Alexiadou, Spaniel and Gunaydin, 2022; Hallerberg

and Wehner, 2020).

Based on these arguments, we advance two main hypotheses:[2]

H1. Politicians with a professional background are perceived as more knowledgeable than the average politician when proposing policies in their areas of expertise.

H2. Politicians with a professional background are better able than the average politician to persuade voters and peers to support policies in their areas of expertise.

The credibility bonus provided by occupational cues may also give legislators more leeway to stick to their own proposal when negotiating with other legislators. Bargaining is a central element of policymaking, and the degree to which politicians are willing to compromise shapes the policies that are eventually implemented. Compromise is often both a necessary step for government to make decisions (Adler and Wilkerson, 2013) and a desirable feature of policymaking (Gutmann and Thompson, 2014). Voters often punish legislators who refuse to compromise (Bauer, Yong and Krupnikov (2017), but see Anderson, Butler and Harbridge-Yong (2020)). We posit that legislators with professional experience in a given domain are less likely to be punished for rejecting compromise in their area of expertise:

H3. Politicians with a professional background are less likely than the average politician to be criticized for rejecting compromise solutions in their areas of expertise.

The extent to which legislators can stick to their original proposals affects their ability to independently shape policy. this hypothesis is not central to our main argument about building policy support, it illustrates the downstream implications of politicians' occupational backgrounds on policy outcomes.

Can arguments compensate for occupational effects?

Above we propose that credibility signals explain why voters respond to legislators' occupational backgrounds. We argue that voters and legislators perceive politicians with professional experience in a given domain as better informed and more qualified to pursue policies in their areas of

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[2]All hypotheses reported in the main text were pre-registered. Exploratory analyses in the Results section are identified as such.

expertise. However, legislators may be able to compensate for occupational effects by signaling their knowledge in an issue area through their arguments. Prior work establishes that higher-quality arguments moderate the effect of partisan biases or elite cues in information processing (Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus, 2013; Tappin, Berinsky and Rand, 2023). Therefore, we expect more detailed arguments to partially overcome the effects of occupational background.

H4. The effects of professional background (H1–H3) are smaller when politicians provide more detailed arguments to support their proposals.

If the effects of professional background disappear entirely when legislators provide more detailed arguments, the scope of our main argument is reduced. If more detailed arguments can serve as a substitute for professional background, parties may achieve similar results by promoting a division of labor in the legislature (Krehbiel, 1992). In this scenario, career politicians that develop expertise in a given policy area through committee work may be as effective at building policy support as legislators with professional experience in that area. H4 allows us to assess this alternative argument.

Empirical strategy

We conducted three experiments in different contexts to investigate how legislators' occupational backgrounds affect their ability to build policy support. Table 1 summarizes each study and its goals; the sections that follow describe the experimental vignettes and measures in detail. The first two experiments focus on voters, while the third one studies elected officials. Collectively, they explore the connection between politicians' occupational backgrounds, mass policy support, and coalition building in the legislature.

In Study 1, fielded in Germany, we examine our main prediction. The vignette tests how the professional background of a legislator influences voters' responses to a policy proposal. The results are consistent with our predictions: legislators with professional experience in a particular issue area are perceived as more knowledgeable, and can more effectively persuade voters to

support a policy in that domain. We also explore whether the main effects are driven by the social status of the legislator's profession or by their hands-on experience. The results indicate that politicians who have similar professional experience but in less prestigious roles are equally effective at building policy support.

In Study 2 we build on these findings and use a different context and policy area to test the robustness of the occupational background effects we identify in Study 1. Additionally, we investigate whether the quality of arguments legislators present alongside their proposals can mitigate the influence of professional background. The results indicate that more detailed arguments do *not* offset occupational background effects, underscoring the strength of the initial impressions formed based on professional background.

Study 3 extends the inquiry to elected officials. We explore whether occupational background not only sways voters but also affects how elected officials collaborate and endorse policies. The patterns we observe among politicians largely mirror those of citizens, suggesting that occupational backgrounds can also shape the policymaking process.[3]

Table 1: Description of surveys and experiments

	Location	Subjects	N	Policy Area	Goals
Study 1	Germany	Citizens	2,602	Education	(1) Test H1–H3; (2) Mechanism test: credibility or social status.
Study 2	US	Citizens	2,000	Healthcare	(1) Test H1–H3; (2) Whether better arguments can substitute for professional experience (H4).
Study 3	Sweden	Politicians	1,250	Healthcare	Test H1–H3 among politicians; (2) How partisanship moderates professional background effects

Note: We conducted these studies between October 2022 and October 2023. Bilendi/Respondi fielded Study 1 on a sample of German citizens that is nationally representative along three dimensions: sex, age, and state. Study 2 was fielded as part of the Cooperative Election Study's pre-election wave administered by YouGov in the US on a nationally representative sample. Study 3 was embedded in the Panel of Politicians, a biannual survey of elected officials in Sweden.

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[3]Participants in all three studies received an informed consent prior to completing the survey. The document clarified that they were taking part in a research study, partici and that they would not receive special compensation for this. To avoid deception, all experiments were presented as hypothetical scenarios.

Study 1: Occupational background and social status

Study 1 examines how a legislator's occupational background shapes public support for educational policy reforms. The study was administered to a representative sample of German citizens.[4] Participants were presented with a scenario related to grade retention (requiring students to repeat a grade) and a legislative proposal to eliminate this popular practice in Germany. We conducted the experiment in two waves. In the first wave (N = 1,286), we randomized whether the legislator had experience teaching at different levels of education. The political party of the politician in the vignette always matched the respondent's partisan affiliation, which was measured pre-treatment. This manipulation allows us to account for partisan biases in information processing (Bisgaard, 2019; Bolsen, Druckman and Cook, 2014). See Box 1 for the full wording of the vignette.

Following the vignette, subjects responded to three outcome questions designed to measure their perceptions of the legislator's knowledge, their support for the policy proposal, and their opinion of the legislator's approach to political compromise. We asked how informed the legislator seems to be on this policy issue on a 0–10 scale and their support for the proposal to eliminate grade retention on a 5-point Likert scale. Finally, we asked respondents the following question: "Other politicians in the same party have reservations about the proposal and suggest a few changes. Should the politician find a solution of compromise with his colleagues, or should he stick to the original proposal?" (0 = compromise with other officials; 1 = stick to the original proposal). We randomized question order.

The case of grade retention in Germany

About one-fifth of German students repeat at least one grade during their school careers, typically if they fail to meet the academic standards required for promotion to the next grade. Despite its prevalence, with varying rates across federal states, the implications of grade retention have become the subject of public and academic debate (Rathmann, Loter and Vockert, 2020). Criticism of

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[4]See Table OA.1 for sample descriptives.

In recent years, there has been a growing discussion about improving the performance of elementary school students. With this goal in mind, some states are reconsidering grade retention rules. There is a proposal in a neighboring state legislature to abolish grade retention.

[Professor] Jonathan Schard is a member of the [Respondent's party] in the state legislature [who also works in education. For the last 19 years, he has taught students from elementary school to college]. [Professor/Mr.] Schard supports the proposal to eliminate grade retention. He stated:

"We should replace grade retention with targeted interventions for students struggling in class. Grade retention is an ineffective intervention for promoting student success."

"Making students repeat a grade harms students' self-esteem and adjustment in the new classroom. Repeating the same material does not prepare them for success or actually help them learn the curriculum. Our proposal will replace grade retention with tailored educational practices designed to improve outcomes for students who are academically struggling and at risk of failure."

[As a professor,] I know that states have a responsibility to provide quality education. The way to do that is to replace grade retention.

Note: Respondents in the education background condition received the vignette including the purple text. Those in the control group received the vignette with the green text. The representative's party (gray text) always matched the respondent's party identification.

grade retention centers on its questionable effectiveness in enhancing student performance and development (see Hempenstall (2021) for a review). Research indicates that repeating a grade often fails to yield the expected academic benefits and can negatively impact students' self-esteem and social adjustment. Critics also emphasize the emotional and psychological challenges associated with grade retention, such as stigma and adjusting to new peer groups.

We selected a proposal to eliminate grade retention for three reasons. First, Germans are broadly supportive of the practice: over three-quarters (79%) support the status quo (Lergetporer, Werner and Woessmann, 2017). Hence, the proposal to abolish retention allows us to investigate whether occupational background influences the appeal of an otherwise unpopular policy. Second, while the proposal itself would be potentially controversial, the issue is not overly polarizing or salient, which could lead to ceiling or floor effects in responses. Finally, the issue of grade retention warrants attention in its own right, as it directly relates to the quality of schooling and students' well-being. Ensuring that educational practices are both effective and conducive to students' overall development is a critical aspect of educational policy. The debate surrounding grade retention therefore not only serves as a relevant case for examining the impact of occupational background; it also represents a significant area in which state legislators can have an important policy impact.

Results

Figure 1 presents the main results of Study 1.[5] Panel (a) reveals that subjects perceived legislators who have experience in education as more informed about the policy proposal than those without a background in education ($p<0.01$). As predicted, having a professional background relevant to the policy issue at hand can positively influence public perceptions of the legislator's credibility. The legislator's occupational background also impacted support for abolishing grade retention (panel (b)). The effect is meaningful (0.23; s.e. = 0.07) and corresponds to a 6.6-percentage-point

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[5]Following the pre-analysis plan, Appendix Tables OA.2 and OA.3 report estimates from linear models with and without covariate adjustment for gender, partisanship, and education. The substantive interpretation of the results remains unchanged.

Figure 1: The effects of professional experience in education on legislators' ability to build support for replacing grade retention

Panel (a): Knowledge   Panel (b): Policy support   Panel (c): Reject compromise
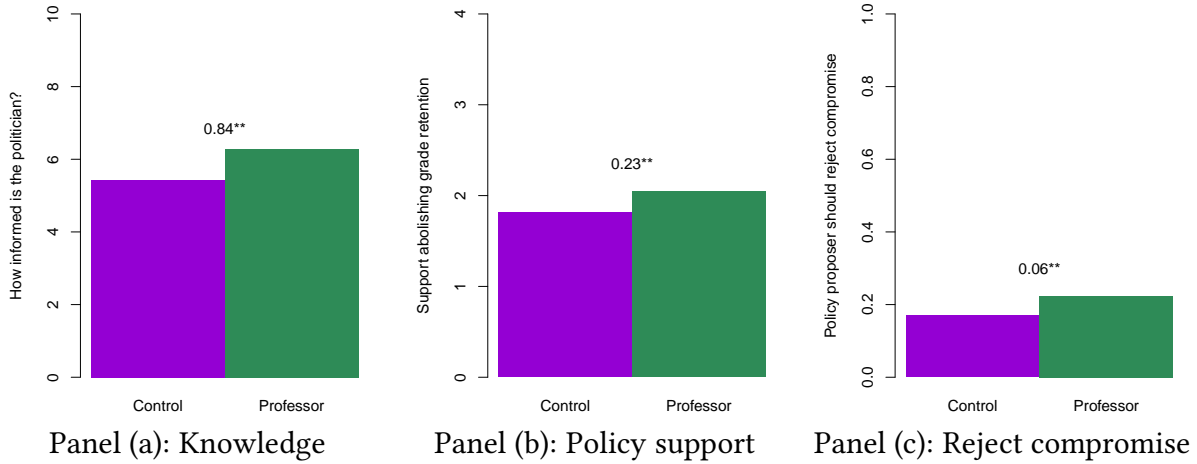
Note: Panel (a) displays mean perceptions of how informed the legislator is (0−10). Panel (b) shows mean levels of support for the proposal (0−4). Panel (c) depicts the proportion of respondents who believe the proposer should reject a compromise solution, by treatment group. Difference-in-means estimates reported over the bars. **(p<0.01), *(p<0.05)

increase in the share of respondents who support the initiative. We did not record pre-treatment measures of support for grade retention to avoid demand effects De Quidt, Haushofer and Roth (2018). However, since participants were randomly assigned to the different scenarios, we can interpret the differences across conditions as the average causal effect of professional background on agreement with the politician, regardless of respondents' pre-existing beliefs. The results show that politicians can use their professional background to build support for unpopular policies in their areas of expertise.

Finally, Figure 1 (panel (c)) indicates that legislators with a professional background in education were given more leeway to reject compromise than those without relevant expertise (0.06; p<0.01). This result is consistent with H3 and suggests that legislators with an appropriate professional background can more forcefully pursue their policy agendas. However, rejecting compromise solutions remains an unpopular position even for legislators with relevant professional experience.

Occupational effects or social status?

In the first wave of the study we contrasted an average legislator with one who was also a professor with experience teaching at different levels. We wanted to provide a strong signal of professional experience. However, since certain occupations are associated with a higher social status or authority, it is possible that the effects we uncover are explained *not* by the perceived knowledge and experience that comes from years of working in the area, but from the implicit authority attributed to being a professor.

To address this concern, we pre-registered an extension of the basic protocol to include an additional treatment group: a legislator who was also a secondary school teacher. The amount of experience (in years) was kept constant. Therefore, in wave 2 there were three groups: control, professor, and teacher. We fielded this extension of Study 1 with a new representative sample of German respondents (N = 1,316) to establish whether traditionally lower-status professions can have a similar impact on perceptions of credibility and persuasion as those considered more prestigious.

Figure 2 presents the main results of this extension. The results replicate the main findings from wave 1, described above. Respondents perceived legislators who are also professors as being better informed than the average legislator about the topic and were persuaded more by them. We find the same substantive results when comparing the teacher-legislator with the average legislator. Hence, the background effects uncovered in both waves of Study 1 cannot simply be explained by the authority or social status associated with professors. In fact, teachers were perceived as slightly more knowledgeable than professors on the topic (+0.34; p=0.05). This could be due to the direct relevance of their professional experience in elementary and secondary education, where the debate over grade retention is more relevant. Finally, Figure OA.1 reports the effects of a legislator's educational background on compromise preferences. The results suggest that respondents are more likely to support a decision not to compromise from either a professor- or teacher-legislator, relative to the average legislator. This is consistent with the findings reported above, but the differences are slightly smaller and indistinguishable from zero.

Figure 2: The effects of professional experience in education (as a teacher or professor) on legislators' ability to build support for replacing grade retention

Panel (a): Perceived knowledge   Panel (b): Policy support
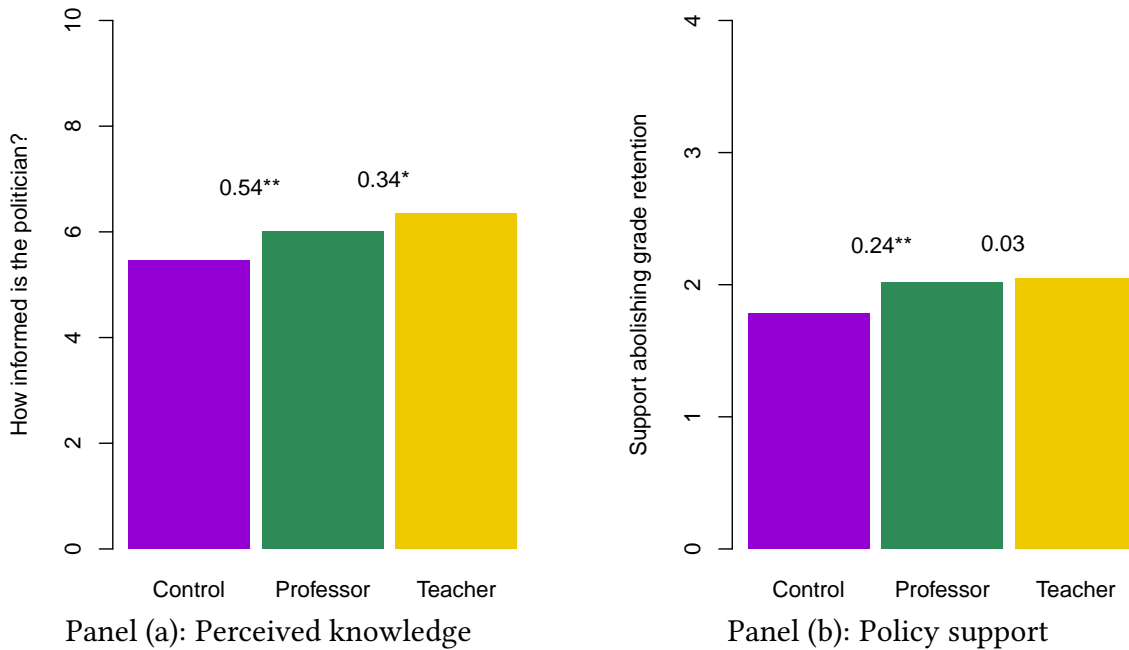
Note: Panel (a) shows mean perceptions of how informed the legislator is (0−10). Panel (b) displays mean levels of support for the proposal (0−4), by treatment group. Difference-in-means estimates reported over the bars. **($p<0.01$), *($p<0.05$)

Study 2: Occupational background and argument quality

We designed Study 2 with two goals in mind. The first was to assess whether the main arguments tested in Study 1 generalize to a different policy area (healthcare) and political context (U.S.). The second goal was to explore whether legislators can compensate for *not* having relevant professional expertise by signaling knowledge on a topic through their arguments. In Study 2, we randomly assigned respondents to one of four conditions in a 2×2 factorial design. The vignette began with the prompt: "There has recently been an explosion in telehealth services, allowing doctors to monitor patients remotely. Some states are reconsidering these policies. There is a proposal in the state legislature to enforce within-state licensing rules and limit insurance coverage for telemedicine visits." Respondents were then presented with varied information about a state legislator who supports this proposal to restrict telehealth services. The information was ran-

domized along two dimensions: (1) the legislator's occupational background and (2) the length and detail of the legislator's arguments in support of the policy (Box 2 contains the question wording).

On the first dimension, the vignette either included or excluded references to the legislator also having a medical degree and working as a general physician. For the second dimension, the brief argument condition simply stated that the legislator supports a proposal to restrict telemedicine and provided a short quote from the legislator stating this position in basic terms. The detailed argument condition included an additional paragraph in which the legislator further justifies his position. Randomizing this component of the vignette independently enables us to test the isolated impact of legislators' personal occupation. It is possible that legislators without comparable relevant qualifications can be just as persuasive by providing a more detailed "expert" argument. As in Study 1, the political party of the politician always matched the respondent's party. Box 2 provides the wording of the vignette, including the elements specific to each condition.

After reading the vignette, respondents were asked the same three outcome questions as in Study 1: perceptions of how informed the legislator is about the issue, support for the policy proposal, and whether the legislator should refuse to compromise if colleagues disagree. The experiment was fielded to a nationally representative sample of U.S. voters as part of the Cooperative Election Study (CES). Table OA.4 provides sample descriptives.

The case of telehealth in the U.S.

We use the case of telehealth policy for two reasons. First, it is a topical issue that has widespread implications for healthcare delivery. While widely adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic, physicians and healthcare providers have reported challenges associated with these new technologies that increase the ecological validity of our design (Breton et al., 2021). Second, it allows us to examine the role of occupational background in a policy area in which public opinion is relatively uniform. The use of telehealth services has been increasing across the U.S., and perceptions

Box 2: Experimental vignette for policy proposal in Study 1

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Representative Reeves, [M.D.], a [Democrat/Republican/Independent] in
the state legislature [who also works as a general physician], supports
the proposal to restrict telemedicine.  He stated:

We should roll back the expansions in virtual medical visits.  The
telehealth infrastructure is not set up to provide quality care to
patients.

[Diagnosing patients online is not as reliable as in-person visits.
When a doctor wants to diagnose a patient, they need to assess them in
person.  On-demand telehealth appointments may be convenient, but they
interrupt the continuity of care and there are more risks that medical
staff won't know a patient's history.  Our proposal will maintain
telehealth services for citizens in special circumstances while ensuring
that in-person visits remain the norm.]

[As a doctor,] I know that states have a responsibility to provide
quality healthcare to patients.  The way to do that is to restrict
telemedicine.
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Note: Respondents in the doctor condition received the vignette including the purple text. Those in the detailed argument condition were shown the vignette including the green text. The representative's party (gray text) was manipulated to match the respondent's party identification. If the respondent identified or leaned Democrat/Republican, the politician was described as a Democrat/Republican. If the respondent was a true independent and did not lean toward either party, the politician was described as an independent.

of the quality of such services has improved. According to a nationally representative poll conducted in 2021, 86% of respondents reported being satisfied with the service (Kyle et al., 2021). As in Study 1, this experiment examines how occupational background can increase support for unpopular policies and counter ceiling or floor effects.

Results

Figure 3 presents the main results of Study 2.[6] Panel (a) displays average levels of perceived knowledge by treatment group. Regardless of the quality of the arguments provided, respondents perceived the physician representative to be significantly more informed than the baseline representative (+1.2 points, $p<0.05$). This effect is sizeable, amounting to 46% of the standard deviation of the outcome. Officials who provided more detailed arguments were also perceived as more knowledgeable than the control representative. On a scale of 0–10, the non-physician representative was rated 4.6 on average when giving the brief argument, and 5.2 when giving the detailed argument (difference in means = 0.8; $p<0.05$). The representative with a background in healthcare was rated 5.7 for the brief argument and 6.4 for the detailed argument (difference in means = 0.7; $p<0.05$).

We find that more detailed arguments do not compensate for professional background effects. Legislators with a background in healthcare who provide *brief* arguments are perceived as more informed than those without such a background who provide more *detailed* arguments (0.57; $p<0.05$). Moreover, the gap in perceived knowledge between the physician legislator and the baseline legislator *increases* when the proposal is followed by more detailed arguments.

Next, we explore whether these differences in credibility perceptions translate into differences in policy support. Panel (b) of Figure 3 displays respondents' average level of support for restricting telehealth services by treatment group. As in Study 1, respondents were more likely to support the proposal when it was presented by a representative with professional experience

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[6]Table OA.5 provides estimates from linear models with and without covariate adjustment. The results remain substantively the same.

Figure 3: Perceived knowledge of policy proposer and support of proposed policy

Panel (a): Perceived knowledge

Panel (b): Policy support
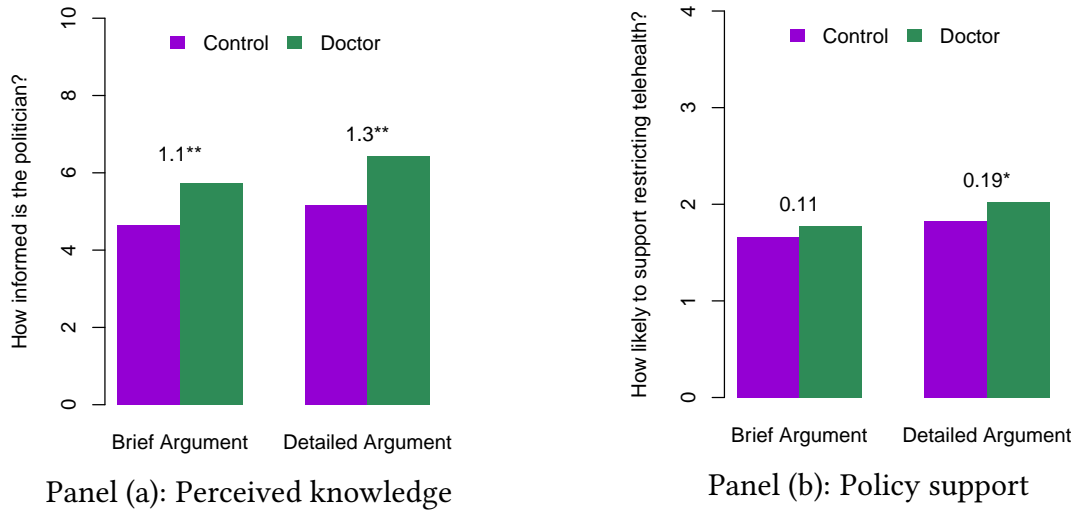
Note: Panel (a) shows mean perceptions of how informed the legislator is $(0-10)$ across doctor and length of argument conditions. Panel (b) displays the respondent's level of support for the proposed policy across doctor and length of argument conditions. **$(p<0.01)$, *$(p<0.05)$

in the area. Pooling across length of arguments, policy support increased by 0.15 points when proposed by the physician legislator instead of the baseline legislator (s.e. = 0.05; $p < 0.01$). Figure 4 depicts the distribution of policy support when proposed by the baseline legislator (purple) vs. the physician legislator (green). While 27.5% of respondents in the control condition said they were "likely" or "very likely" to support restricting telehealth services following the vignette, this number rises to 33.8% for participants who saw the proposal from the legislator with professional experience in healthcare.

Once again, we find no evidence that more detailed arguments serve as a substitute for occupational background effects. If this were the case, we should observe a decrease in background effects when the legislator presented more detailed arguments, yet the results in Panel (b) suggest the opposite pattern. The professional background effects are mainly driven by the detailed argument condition (0.19; s.e. = 0.07). The physician legislator also generated more policy support among respondents in the brief argument condition, but the difference is smaller and indistinguishable from zero (0.11; $p = 0.14$). This pattern is consistent with the results for perceived

Figure 4: Policy support by physician treatment/control
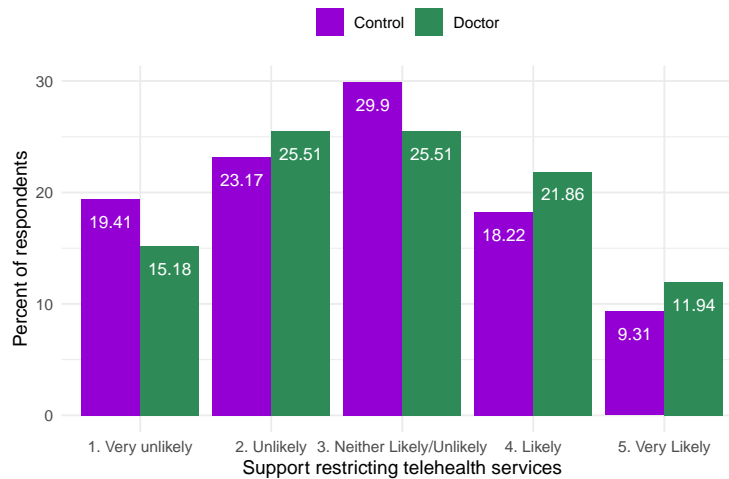
Note: Percent of respondents in each policy support level by assignment to physician treatment.

knowledge and does not corroborate H4.

Finally, respondents largely opposed legislators who rejected compromise solutions (Figure 5). Only 26% of respondents across conditions believe the representative should stick to their original proposal instead of compromising. Additionally, as in Study 1, we find that legislators with professional experience in the policy domain are given more leeway to reject compromise solutions. Pooling across types of arguments, respondents were 5.6 percentage points more likely to accept a refusal to compromise from the physician legislator than from the baseline legislator. This result suggests that officials with relevant occupational expertise are not only more likely to build support for proposals in their area, but can unilaterally push them through the legislative process with less pushback from voters. Overall, the results corroborate Study 1's findings in a different context and policy area, and reveal professional background effects cannot be substituted by better arguments.

Figure 5: Respondents' support for rejecting compromise, by the proposer's professional background and level of argument detail
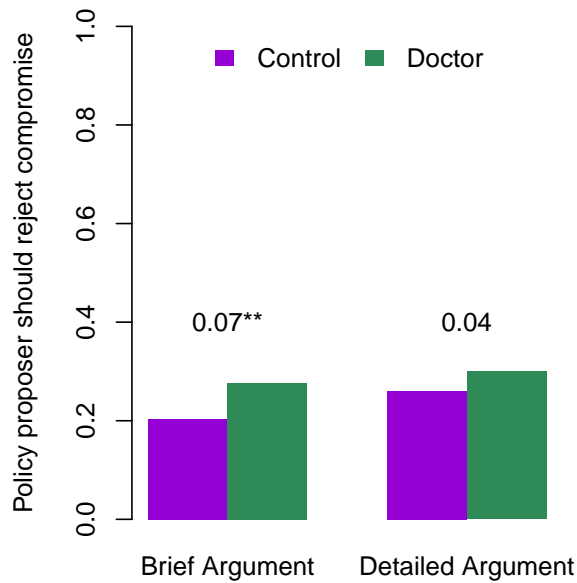
Note: Mean perceptions of whether the legislator should compromise (0) or stick to the original plan (1), by experimental condition.

Study 3: The effects of professional background on coalition building

The findings so far provide compelling evidence that legislators with a professional background in a given domain can more effectively persuade voters to support policies in their areas of expertise. Study 3 explores whether lawmakers' occupational backgrounds can also help build policy coalitions in the legislature. If background effects are mainly driven by credibility and perceived knowledge, as the previous findings suggest, the same mechanism may also apply to legislators interacting with their peers. Legislating requires coordination, and politicians' ability to build coalitions is key to effective policymaking.

We embedded a survey experiment similar to that used in Study 2 in the Panel of Politicians, a biannual survey of Swedish politicians (N = 1,250).[7] The respondents are mostly local elected officials, but the panel also includes a mix of regional- and national-level politicians. We ran-

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[7]See Table OA.6 for sample descriptives.

domized public officials into one of four conditions in a 2×2 factorial design. The vignette began with the introduction: "In the next section we will present you with a scenario that policymakers often deal with. There has recently been an explosion in telemedicine services, allowing doctors to monitor patients remotely. Some regions are reconsidering these policies. There is a proposal in your regional council to enforce licensing rules and limit telemedicine visits." Respondents were then presented with varied information about a regional councilor who advocates a policy that would restrict telemedicine.

The experiment randomized two dimensions – the policy proponent's (1) professional background and (2) partisan affiliation. For the first dimension, half of the respondents were informed that the council member had a medical background, and the other half received no such information, as in Study 2. For the second dimension, officials were either informed that the councilor was a co-partisan or an out-partisan. The out-partisan legislator was from either the main center-left party, the Social Democratic Party (for respondents from right-of-center parties) or from the main center-right party, the Moderate Party (for respondents from left-of-center parties).[8] Box 3 presents the English translation of the vignette.

We estimate the effects of professional background on the same three outcome variables used in the previous studies.[9] We also asked respondents how likely they would be to co-sponsor the proposal along with the councilor proposing it (0 = very unlikely; 10 = very likely). This new outcome measure allows us to capture the direct impact of a councilor's professional background on legislative behavior. Examining political elites' willingness to co-sign the bill indicates that professional credentials may be a strategic tool for garnering support and facilitating coalition building in the legislature. Assessing politicians' co-sponsorship intentions is key to understanding how legislative motions gain momentum within and across parties, especially when they may initially lack widespread appeal.

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[8]If the respondent did not specify their party, the legislator in the vignette was described as a member of a different party.

[9]We asked respondents to indicate how informed they believe the councilor is about the issue (0–10 scale), how much they personally support the policy (5-point Likert scale), and whether they think the councilor should stick to the original proposal or accept compromise solutions.

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Ledamot Olsson, [M.D.,] is a member of [your party / of [the Social
Democratic/Moderate] Party/ of a different party] [who also works as a
general physician].  He supports the proposal to restrict telemedicine.
He stated:


We should roll back the expansion of virtual medical visits.  The
telemedicine infrastructure is not set up to provide quality care
to patients and it skews competition between providers.  Diagnosing
patients online is not as reliable as in-person visits.  On-demand
telemedicine appointments may be convenient, but they interrupt the
continuity of care and there are more risks that medical staff won't
know a patient's history.  Our proposal will review the compensation
system and maintain digital telemedicine services only for citizens in
special circumstances.  In-person visits should remain the norm.


[We/As a doctor, I know that we] have a responsibility to provide
quality healthcare to patients.  The way to do that is to restrict
telemedicine.
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Note: Participants in the physician background condition received the vignette with the purple text. The partisanship treatment in green text was adjusted according to the respondent's self-reported party. The co-partisan condition read "of your party." The out-partisan condition read "of the Social Democratic Party" for Moderates, Christian Democrats, and Sweden Democrats, "of the Moderate Party" for Social Democrats and members of the Left, Green, Centre and Liberal Party, and "of a different party" if no party was reported. "Ledamot" is a general title for regional councilors in Swedish.

The Swedish context

We again use the case of telehealth for this experiment to permit a direct comparison with the results of Study 2. As in the U.S., virtual healthcare is popular in Sweden. Telemedicine consultations are generally considered to meet current healthcare needs and offer an efficient option for medical visits (Gabrielsson-Järhult, Kjellström and Josefsson, 2021). Concerns about telehealth, used to craft the argument for restriction presented in our vignette, are again similar to those in the U.S., relating to implementation and continuity of care (Blix and Jeansson, 2018; Neher et al., 2022). Still, virtual care remains popular; the Swedish government recently announced its aim to

become "the best in the world" at offering telemedicine services by 2025.[10]

One unique component of the telehealth policy debate in Sweden is important to note. In the Swedish healthcare market, the disparity in compensation structures between private digital healthcare services and traditional healthcare centers causes an imbalance in competition. A recent report from the Swedish Competition Authority highlights that although both sectors operate in the same market, they are compensated based on fundamentally different principles. This imbalance is particularly evident in the "out-of-county compensation" system, under which healthcare centers receive lower compensation for digital services compared to private entities. The report calls for a review of this system due to its implications for fair competition. It also notes that private digital services have significantly promoted the digital transformation of healthcare, again suggesting that restricting telehealth altogether would be widely unpopular. Our vignette integrates these ideas into the councilor's argument, noting that the telehealth infrastructure "skews competition between providers" and that the policy proposal will "review the compensation system."

Results

Figure 6 presents the main results of Study 3.[11] Swedish politicians perceived peers who also work as physicians to be more knowledgeable about telehealth services (panel (a)). They also considered co-partisan physician legislators to be notably more informed (6.7) than non-physician co-partisan legislators (5.4). This pattern holds even when the policy endorser is a member of the main party on the opposite side of the ideological spectrum (out-partisan condition); the distinction is more subtle, but still evident and statistically significant. Respondents exposed to out-partisan doctor legislators believed they were more knowledgeable, with an average score of 6.0, compared to 5.5 for those exposed to the average out-partisan legislator ($p<0.05$).

The patterns are less pronounced for the results for individual policy support. As shown in

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[10]See https://www.trade.gov/market-intelligence/sweden-digital-healthcare-services-market-overview.

[11]Table OA.7 provides estimates from the OLS regressions. The results remain substantively the same.

Figure 6 (panel (b)), among co-partisan respondents, there is a slight increase in support for the proposed policy when the legislator is described as a physician (3.05) compared to when they are not (2.89), but this difference is indistinguishable from zero. The patterns are similar for out-partisan respondents. However, respondents were more willing to co-sponsor a proposal put forward by a physician (panel (c)). Regardless of the proponent's partisan affiliation, respondents exposed to the physician councilor's proposal were 0.56 points more likely to express an interest in co-sponsoring the proposal relative to the control condition (s.e. = 0.21; $p<0.01$). This effect is mainly driven by co-partisans, for whom the difference increases by almost a full point on the 10-point scale. If the physician legislator is an out-partisan, respondents were not significantly more likely to co-sponsor the proposal, relative to the average out-partisan legislator (0.3 points, $p=0.31$). Together, the results suggest that legislators with relevant professional experience may induce acquiescence from co-partisan peers in their areas of expertise. Even if they are not more likely to persuade other officials to change their opinion on the issue, they can still be compelled to co-sponsor the proposal. Yet since the effect sizes for policy support are only marginally smaller than those uncovered in Study 2 (see Figure 3), a more well powered experiment, we cannot rule out the possibility that a legislator's professional background has small positive effects on policy support.

Finally, we assess the effects on compromise preferences (panel (d) of Figure 6). Overall, Swedish politicians felt that legislators with a medical background should *resist compromise* on the healthcare proposal more than the average legislator (5.6 percentage points; s.e. = 0.02). When considering partisan alignment, officials felt even more strongly that co-partisan legislators with relevant expertise should reject compromise solutions (8.5 percentage points; $p = 0.02$). For out-partisan legislators, the influence of professional background is indistinguishable from zero. These findings suggest that political elites are more inclined to endorse resistance to compromise by co-partisan legislators with relevant professional backgrounds; out-partisan legislators are not granted such leniency, regardless of their professional expertise.

In sum, Swedish politicians consistently viewed peers with a healthcare background as more

Figure 6: The effects of professional experience in healthcare on Swedish legislators' responses to the policy proposal
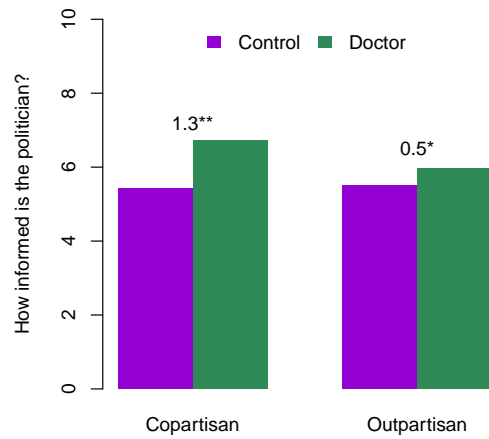
Panel (a): Perceived knowledge
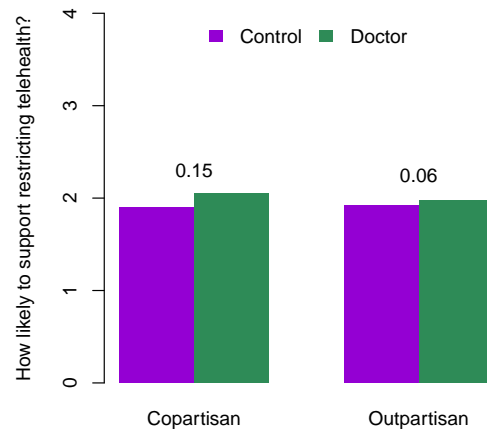
Panel (b): Policy support
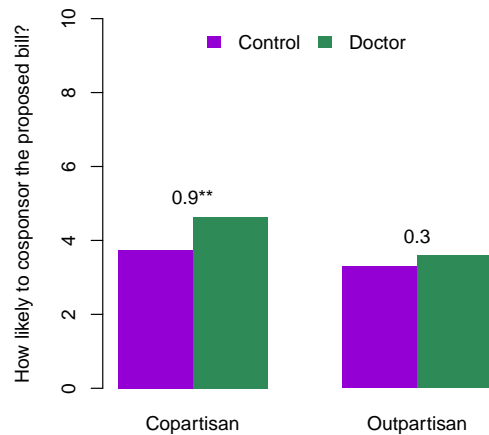
Panel (c): Co-sponsorship intentions
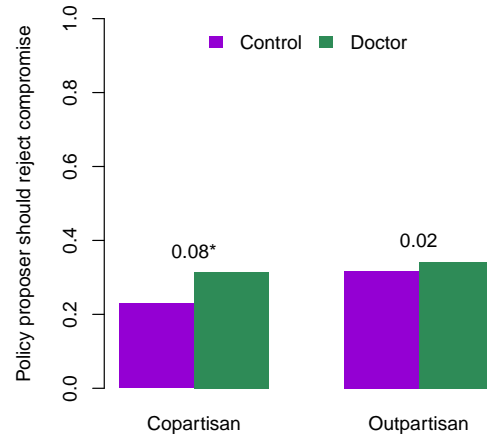
Panel (d): Compromise preferences

Note: Panel (a) displays the mean perceptions of how informed the legislator is (0—10) across conditions. Panel (b) shows respondents' level of support for the proposed policy. Panel (c) illustrates legislators' interest in co-sponsoring the proposal (0—10), and panel (d) depicts the mean perceptions of whether the proponent should compromise (0) or stick to the original plan (1). **(p<0.01), *(p<0.05)

knowledgeable about the policy issue. This recognition was especially prominent among co-partisans, indicating that partisanship can amplify the effects of perceived expertise. In turn, professional background signals made peers more willing to co-sponsor the proposal although it only changed their opinions on the issue residually. Finally, respondents were content for co-partisan (but not out-partisan) legislators with relevant expertise to reject compromise solutions.

Conclusion

Prior work has established that various forms of descriptive representation can influence policy outcomes. This is often attributed to differences in issue priorities, policy preferences, or the subconstituencies that politicians are catering to. Our study suggests an alternative mechanism: politicians with different backgrounds are more effective at building support for policies in their areas of expertise, which facilitates coalition building, strengthens the positions supported by legislators, and can ultimately shape policy outcomes.

We explore this argument in the context of legislators' occupational background and find support for our main prediction – that legislators with professional experience in a given domain are more effective at persuading others to support policies in this area. Individuals perceived legislators who have a background in education or healthcare as better informed about the issues of grade retention in Germany and telemedicine in the United States. Voters were also more likely to support broadly unpopular policies if a legislator with relevant professional experience proposed them compared to one without such experience. Hence, occupational cues persuaded voters to support a policy that they would otherwise be more likely to oppose.

The effects of occupational cues extend to other lawmakers. In Study 3 we demonstrate that Swedish politicians are more likely to consider co-sponsoring legislation if the proponent has professional experience in the area. Importantly, we find that the *status* of the professional background, at least in education, does not drive these effects. This result suggests that the relevance of professional experience is more critical than the prestige associated with a particular profes-

sion. Together, the results reveal that parties can benefit from promoting occupational diversity in the legislature. Officials with pertinent occupational backgrounds are more effective at building public support for new policies and developing legislative coalitions.

Despite our efforts to provide generalizable evidence across countries, issues, voters, and politicians, at least three important questions remain unanswered. First, are the effects we uncover specific to education and healthcare, or should we expect them to travel to other policy domains? Recent work suggests that the credibility of experts varies by sector, partly as a function of scientific prestige (Scheitle, 2018). Second, in Study 3 we find some evidence that partisanship moderates the effects of occupational cues. This result is consistent with several prior studies on partisan-motivated reasoning (Bolsen, Druckman and Cook, 2014), but requires further investigation. In addition to partisanship, we speculate that the effects of occupational cues may be moderated by how politicized a particular issue is, and the degree to which there is a potential conflict of interest between the legislator's occupation and the policy proposal. Finally, it is possible that the effects are partly driven by an aversion to career politicians rather than domain-specific credibility. When legislators highlight their experience outside politics, voters may infer that they are not career politicians and update their image of the legislator accordingly. This alternative mechanism, while plausible for voters, seems less likely to explain the results of our elite survey (Study 3). Given the robustness of the effects on perceived knowledge, we find the credibility mechanism more plausible. Future work could test this mechanism using an experiment in which the occupation of the policy proponent does not match the proposed policy.

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Online Appendix (Supporting Information) for

"Why Parties Can Benefit From Promoting Occupational Diversity in Legislatures: Experimental Evidence From Three Countries"

Table of Contents

Appendix A - Study 1: Descriptives and additional analyses

Table OA.1 provides descriptive statistics for both waves of Study 1. The survey was fielded by Respondi/Bilendi and both samples are representative along sex, age, and state. Tables OA.2 and OA.3 provide OLS estimates of the effects of the policy proponent's professional background on different outcomes. The tables include simple linear regressions and regressions with covariate adjustment as described in the pre-analysis plan. Finally, Figure OA.1 describes the effects of education background on compromise preferences in wave 2.

Figure OA.1: Effects of education background on compromise preferences
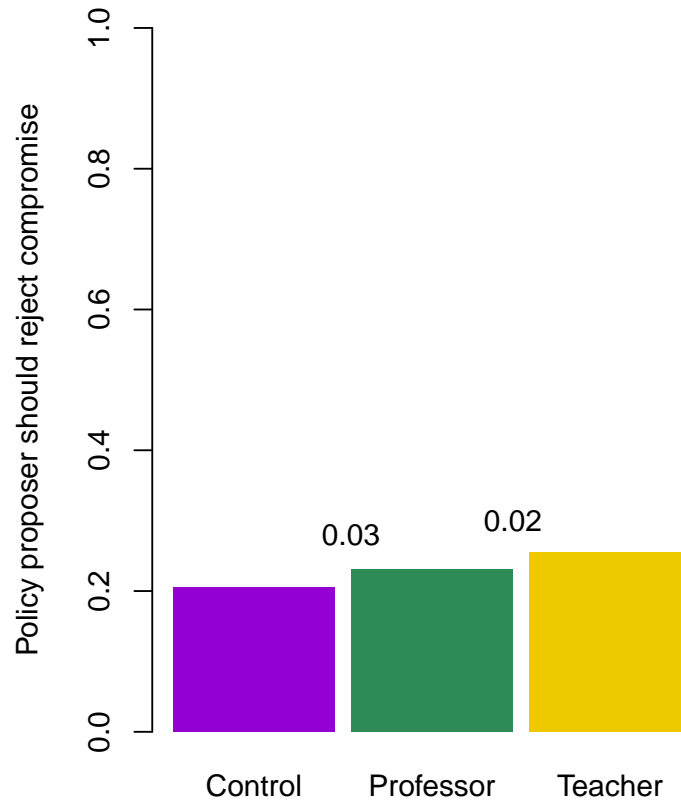
Note: The plot describes the proportion of respondents who believe the proposer should reject compromise solution, by treatment group. Difference-in-means estimates reported over the bars. **(p<0.01), *(p<0.05)

Box OA.1: Study 1: Descriptives

	Wave 1 (%)	Wave 2 (%)
Baden-Württemberg	13.69	14.36
Bayern	15.71	14.97
Berlin	4.04	4.86
Brandenburg	3.27	2.43
Bremen	0.62	0.91
Hamburg	2.26	2.66
Hessen	7.00	8.43
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	1.79	2.28
Niedersachsen	9.80	9.04
Nordrhein-Westfalen	21.77	20.59
Rheinland-Pfalz	4.98	4.94
Saarland	1.01	1.44
Sachsen	4.59	5.24
Sachsen-Anhalt	2.95	2.43
Schleswig-Holstein	3.42	3.42
Thüringen	3.11	1.98
AfD	18.90	19.91
Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	12.91	12.99
CDU/CSU	25.66	26.75
FDP	5.75	5.93
Linke	6.14	5.47
Other	15.71	13.45
SPD	14.93	15.50
Woman	51.56	50.46
College degree	26.59	25.38
N	1,286	1,316

Box OA.2: The effects of professional experience in education on response to proposal to replacce grade retention (Wave 1)

	Informed		Policy support		Reject compromise	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Professor	0.844***	0.845***	0.231***	0.238***	0.063***	0.062***
	(0.131)	(0.130)	(0.072)	(0.072)	(0.022)	(0.022)
Woman		0.221*		0.272***		0.013
		(0.131)		(0.072)		(0.023)
Education		0.021		−0.067*		−0.028**
		(0.071)		(0.039)		(0.012)
Greens		0.407*		0.499***		0.020
		(0.237)		(0.130)		(0.041)
CDU/CSU		−0.303		−0.002		−0.022
		(0.196)		(0.108)		(0.034)
FDP		0.137		0.102		−0.082
		(0.309)		(0.170)		(0.053)
Linke		0.463		0.491***		−0.011
		(0.302)		(0.165)		(0.052)
Other		−0.652***		0.028		−0.001
		(0.229)		(0.126)		(0.040)
SPD		0.163		0.192		0.043
		(0.225)		(0.123)		(0.039)
Constant	5.433***	5.317***	2.813***	2.720***	0.169***	0.242***
	(0.091)	(0.250)	(0.050)	(0.137)	(0.016)	(0.043)
Observations	1,257	1,257	1,257	1,257	1,261	1,261
R^2	0.032	0.056	0.008	0.043	0.006	0.016

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Box OA.3: The effects of professional experience in education on response to proposal to replacce grade retention (Wave 2)

	Informed		Policy support		Reject compromise	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Professor	0.541***	0.516***	0.238***	0.233***	0.026	0.027
	(0.164)	(0.163)	(0.086)	(0.086)	(0.028)	(0.028)
Teacher	0.885***	0.866***	0.264***	0.246***	0.050*	0.046
	(0.167)	(0.166)	(0.088)	(0.087)	(0.028)	(0.028)
Woman		−0.131		0.137*		0.014
		(0.136)		(0.071)		(0.023)
Education		0.076		−0.043		−0.027**
		(0.074)		(0.039)		(0.013)
Greens		0.210		0.181		0.012
		(0.244)		(0.128)		(0.042)
CDU/CSU		−0.655***		−0.361***		−0.060*
		(0.200)		(0.105)		(0.034)
FDP		−0.565*		−0.130		−0.015
		(0.318)		(0.167)		(0.055)
Linke		0.268		0.166		0.027
		(0.325)		(0.171)		(0.056)
Other		−0.820***		−0.134		0.012
		(0.238)		(0.125)		(0.041)
SPD		−0.211		−0.012		−0.031
		(0.228)		(0.120)		(0.039)
Constant	5.466***	5.650***	2.782***	2.929***	0.205***	0.291***
	(0.115)	(0.267)	(0.060)	(0.140)	(0.020)	(0.046)
Observations	1,316	1,316	1,316	1,316	1,316	1,316
R^2	0.021	0.047	0.009	0.034	0.002	0.012

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Appendix B - Study 2: Descriptives and additional analyses

Table OA.4 provides descriptive statistics for study 2. The experiment was embedded in the Cooperative Election Study pre-election survey in the US and was administered by YouGov. Table OA.5 provides OLS estimates of the effects professional background and argument quality on different outcomes. The table includes models with and without covariate adjustment, as described in the pre-analysis plan.

Box OA.4: Study 2: Descriptives

	(%)
Women	53.80
Men	46.20
Democrat	46.30
Independent/Not Sure	18.10
Republican	35.60
No HS	4.20
HS grad	27.80
Some college	22.60
2-year	12.00
4-year	20.70
Post grad	12.70
White	68.70
Black	13.90
Hispanic	9.60
Asian	2.40
Two or more races	2.30
Other	3.10
N	2,000

Box OA.5: The effects of professional experience in healthcare and argument quality on legislators' ability to build support for restricting telehealth services

	Informed		Policy support		Reject compromise	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Control - Detailed	0.530***	0.561***	0.165**	0.184**	0.057**	0.064**
	(0.158)	(0.156)	(0.077)	(0.076)	(0.028)	(0.027)
Doctor - Brief	1.102***	1.159***	0.113	0.121	0.073***	0.069**
	(0.159)	(0.157)	(0.078)	(0.076)	(0.028)	(0.027)
Doctor - Detailed	1.784***	1.795***	0.360***	0.342***	0.097***	0.087***
	(0.160)	(0.158)	(0.079)	(0.077)	(0.028)	(0.027)
Man		0.497***		0.154***		0.053***
		(0.112)		(0.054)		(0.019)
Education		-0.088**		-0.098***		-0.044***
		(0.038)		(0.018)		(0.006)
Independent		-0.577***		0.153**		0.161***
		(0.157)		(0.076)		(0.027)
Republican		0.330***		0.395***		0.113***
		(0.124)		(0.061)		(0.021)
Constant	4.640***	4.681	2.665***	2.773***	0.203***	0.267***
	(0.113)	(0.202)	(0.055)	(0.098)	(0.020)	(0.034)
Observations	1,954	1,954	1,998	1,998	1,996	1,996
R^2	0.066	0.093	0.011	0.054	0.007	0.064

Note: $^*p<0.1$; $^{**}p<0.05$; $^{***}p<0.01$

Appendix C - Study 3: Descriptives and additional analyses

Table OA.6 provides descriptive statistics for study 3. The experiment was embedded in wave 20 of the Panel of Politicians, a biannual survey of elected officials in Sweden. Access to descriptives is restricted to ensure the anonymity of participants. Table OA.7 provides OLS estimates of the effects of the proponent's professional background and partisanship on legislators' response to the proposal to restrict telehealth services.

Box OA.6: Study 3: Descriptives

	(%)
Woman	34.2
Left-wing party	59.5
60 years old or more	56.7
College degree or higher	67.3
N	1,250

Box OA.7: The effects of professional experience in healthcare and copartisanship on legislators' response to restricting telehealth services

	Informed	Policy support	Cosponsor	Reject compromise
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Doctor	0.859***	0.103	0.580***	0.052*
	(0.152)	(0.077)	(0.215)	(0.027)
Copartisan	0.336**	0.028	0.739***	-0.058**
	(0.152)	(0.077)	(0.215)	(0.027)
Constant	5.303***	2.895***	3.150***	0.303***
	(0.130)	(0.065)	(0.183)	(0.023)
Observations	1,160	1,196	1,194	1,144
R^2	0.030	0.002	0.015	0.007
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Appendix D - Pre-Analyses Plans

Anonymous pre-analysis plans are available in the next pages as well as online here (education issue) and here (healthcare issue).