

The Intersection of Racial and Partisan Discrimination: Evidence from a Correspondence Study of Four-Year Colleges

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Social decisions are often imbued with biases that can lead to discrimination against certain groups of people. Racial minorities frequently find themselves on the receiving end of such discrimination. Recent work also reveals partisan bias such that members of one political party unfairly favor their copartisans or discriminate against members of the other party. In this article, we use an e-mail correspondence study to explore the impact of racial and partisan discrimination in higher education. We find no direct evidence of a racial or political bias; however, we do find that African Americans who reference politics in any way receive substantially fewer responses. This coheres with the theory of racial threat: members of a majority group are averse to minorities who might threaten their political, economic, or social status.

When it comes to higher education, few issues generate as much controversy as diversity. Racial diversity in particular has long been a flash point for debate, including arguments about desegregation and the use of race as a factor in admissions decisions. While not garnering as much legal attention, the question of political diversity on college campuses has similarly led to heated discussion. Of particular note are concerns about liberal overrepresentation and discrimination against conservatives. Recent meta-analyses document the enduring impact of racial discrimination in American life (Quillian et al. 2017). At the same time, a growing body of work suggests that partisan political considerations may sometimes influence social and economic decisions (McConnell et al. 2018). We offer an empirical test of racial and partisan biases at one point in the higher education process: informational requests from prospective applicants to four-year colleges. Responses to such

requests have the potential to affect applicants' decisions (e.g., do they end up applying?) and offer a testing ground for social decision-making more generally.

RACIAL AND POLITICAL DISCRIMINATION IN DECISION-MAKING

Our interest is in the real-world prevalence of racial and partisan discrimination in college admissions. We thus focus on the behavior of individuals who work at colleges and receive requests for information from prospective students about undergraduate admissions. Our question is whether the race or partisanship of these prospective students affects their likelihood of receiving a response. We preregistered three (all else constant) hypotheses (<https://aspredicted.org/7wx5x.pdf>), each of which draws on extant literatures too vast to review here (see the appendix, available online, for detailed theoretical discussion).

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The study was conducted in compliance with relevant laws and was approved by the Northwestern University Institutional Review Board. Data and supporting materials necessary to reproduce the numerical results in the article are available in the *JOP* Dataverse (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop>). An appendix with supplementary material is available at <https://doi.org/10.1086/708776>. For confidentiality reasons, some variables in the data are redacted, but the full data are available from the authors upon request and promise of maintaining confidentiality.

1. The racial discrimination hypothesis builds on an enormous literature showing racial discrimination in many settings (Quillian et al. 2017): relative to whites, African Americans will be less likely to receive information upon request.
2. The partisan discrimination hypothesis extends work showing partisans discriminate against their political opponents (McConnell et al. 2018): partisans will be less (more) likely to receive information upon request from members of the other (same) party.
3. The political engagement discrimination hypothesis follows recent scholarship on how people prefer to avoid political discussion altogether (Klar and Krupnikov 2016): any mention of politics, regardless of the partisan connotation, will lower the likelihood of response.

CORRESPONDENCE STUDY OF COLLEGE ADMISSIONS INFORMATION REQUESTS

We test these hypotheses with a correspondence study. This approach involves sending fictitious requests that vary key attributes so as to document the presence of discrimination based on these attributes (Quillian et al. 2017). Our population includes all accredited degree-granting colleges and universities in the United States that offered at least one bachelor's degree program per the National Center for Education Statistics as of 2016. As explained in the appendix, we arrived at a sample of 1,519 schools.

Our design involved sending an e-mail, purportedly from a prospective applicant, requesting more information about the school to each contact. The content of the e-mail varied two factors—race and political reference—but was otherwise constant. The e-mail address and signature included a name connoting either an African American male or a white male (respectively, Jabari Washington or Dalton Wood). The content of the e-mail provided some personal background information in the form of extracurricular involvement. It then varied political

mentions in one of four ways: (1) *no politics*, where the individual states he has been active with a civics club, (2) *politically engaged*, where the individual states he has been active with a club that organizes political discussions, (3) *Democratic*, where the individual states he has been active with the Young Democrats, or (4) *Republican*, where the individuals states he has been active with the Young Republicans. Thus, each school was randomly assigned to one of eight conditions, as shown in table 1. This allows us to test the aforementioned hypotheses by examining whether the e-mail response rates differ on the basis of race, partisan affiliation, or political engagement. Given the presumed rarity of explicit references to political affiliation in this context, the partisan message serves as a strong signal. As such—and as we discuss further in the appendix—it may put an upper bound on any partisan effect. In the appendix we provide details about our design choices and implementation, as well as the precise e-mail texts.

RESULTS

Our main analysis focuses on whether the school to which an e-mail was sent responded. Overall, an impressive 71.56% of schools replied to our inquiries (see the appendix on how we coded responses). To test our predictions, we regress a binary variable indicating response on a set of variables identifying key experimental conditions for each hypothesis. For the racial discrimination hypothesis, we add a variable indicating whether the prospective student is African American (conditions 2, 4, 6, and 8). For the partisan discrimination hypothesis, we add variables indicating whether the prospective student is a Democrat (conditions 5 and 6) or a Republican (conditions 7 and 8). We initially assume the message recipients (admissions staff) are Democrats, reflecting the tendency of employees at colleges and universities to be more liberal than the general public (Honeycutt and Freberg 2017). We then relax this assumption by measuring the likely partisanship of respondents using presidential vote (i.e., Clinton vote share in 2016) in the

Table 1. Experimental Conditions

Condition	N	Name	Treatment Text*
1. White nonpolitical	191	Dalton Wood	“been active with a civics club”
2. African American nonpolitical	187	Jabari Washington	“been active with a civics club”
3. White politically engaged	191	Dalton Wood	“been active with a club that organizes political discussions”
4. African American politically engaged	191	Jabari Washington	“been active with a club that organizes political discussions”
5. White Democrat	190	Dalton Wood	“been active with the Young Democrats”
6. African American Democrat	191	Jabari Washington	“been active with the Young Democrats”
7. White Republican	190	Dalton Wood	“been active with the Young Republicans”
8. African American Republican	190	Jabari Washington	“been active with the Young Republicans”

* See the appendix for the full e-mail text.

Table 2. Response Rate Regressions

	E-Mail Response	
	(1)	(2)
African American	-.268** (.114)	-.275** (.115)
Democrat	.095 (.160)	-.532 (.437)
Republican	-.024 (.158)	.096 (.424)
Political mention	-.263 (.163)	-.265 (.164)
Clinton vote share		-.899* (.471)
Clinton vote × Democrat		-.226 (.786)
Clinton vote × Republican		1.279 (.832)
Constant	1.243*** (.134)	1.686*** (.272)
Log likelihood	-902.25	-897.64
Observations	1,519	1,516

Note. Logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Two-tailed significance tests.

* $p < .1$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

county in which each college resides as a proxy (Gift and Gift 2015). The idea is that, all else constant, respondents are more likely to be Democrats (Republicans) in areas with higher Democratic (Republican) vote share. Finally, for the political engagement discrimination hypothesis, we add a variable to reflect any mention of politics (conditions 3–8).

We present the results in table 2. Column 1 operates from the assumption that respondents are Democrats. We see no evidence for the partisan discrimination hypothesis or the political engagement hypothesis—neither partisans (whether Democrat or Republican) nor politically engaged individuals are treated differently. We do see, however, that African American solicitations receive significantly fewer responses. Column 2 introduces interactions to proxy for admissions officials' partisanship: in this case, we should see discrimination against (for) Republicans (Democrats) as Clinton vote share increases.¹ We do observe interactions that are correctly signed insofar as Republicans face decreasing response rates,

and Democrats increasing response rates, as Clinton vote share increases. Both interactions, though, fall short of significance (the Democrat interaction is $p = .12$). Thus, we have no clear evidence of partisan discrimination despite the ostensible strength of the partisan signal; there appear to be limits to partisan discrimination, as other researchers have suggested (Lelkes and Westwood 2017). We also continue to see no political engagement effect but observe a very strong racial discrimination effect.

Do these results suggest racial bias in the college admissions process? To probe further, we turn to the individual condition percentages in figure 1. These reveal that there is no direct effect of racial bias. The white nonpolitical condition 1 compared to the African American nonpolitical condition 2 shows no significant difference, and, if anything, the results move in the direction of a preference for the African American student, perhaps reflecting diversity missions (72.78%–77.54%; $z = 1.07$, $p < .30$). The main drop-off, which drives the regression result, comes from the conditions featuring an African American student who mentions politics in any way. All three conditions that involve an African American mentioning anything political (conditions 4, 6, 8) have response rates of approximately 66%. This compares to a roughly 75% rate in other conditions (comparing the former three conditions to the latter five gives $t_{1517} = 3.76$, $p < .01$). The average difference between those conditions is about 9.0%, which is similar to the racial bias effect found in studies of legislative responsiveness (Costa 2017, 249). This is sensible since both situations involve a minority signaling a political interest.

We did not anticipate this precise dynamic, but the result coheres with the theory of racial threat. This theory suggests that prejudice can occur because of a “perception by the dominant group that an outside group threatens their group’s prerogatives” (Quillian 1995, 586; also see Craig, Rucker, and Richeson 2018). These threats may be political, economic, or cultural (Blalock 1967). In our case, the idea of a politically engaged minority group member may have caused (possibly unconscious) discomfort since it portends to displace the dominant position of the majority group. This explains why the response rates drop for African Americans only when politics is mentioned (see Thornhill [2019] for a similar result). An alternative possibility is that an African American male prospective student primes negative stereotypes about future behavior (Harper 2015), and this becomes accentuated when the student suggests political engagement. The mechanism in play is a matter for future work, as is the issue of whether we would observe a similar pattern of results with female prospective students. These are questions that likely could best be tested by directly surveying admissions staff concerning their reactions to distinct student profiles. Our contribution to such an effort is identifying an understudied and often ignored type

1. In the appendix, we provide a test with a proxy for the respondent's race, finding no moderating impact on racial bias.

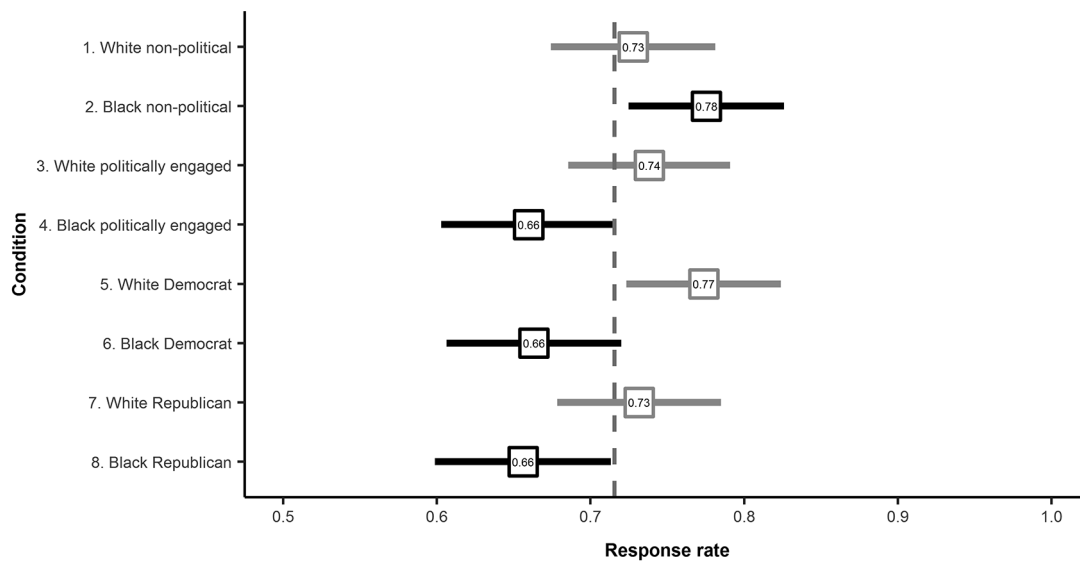


Figure 1. Response rates for each experimental condition are displayed within the corresponding boxes, with error bars representing 90% confidence intervals. The dashed line represents the mean response rate across all conditions.

of intersectional discrimination—while dimensions of race or politics on their own may not invite disparate treatment, particular mixtures of the two can be a deleterious source of bias.

These findings also offer some lessons for ongoing debates about preregistration and replication. Our null results on straightforward racial and partisan discrimination highlight the importance of testing extant theories in new situations to probe their reach. Also, that our main result is not one that was preregistered speaks to the importance of conducting exploratory analyses and potentially connecting new findings to existing theories when appropriate.

CONCLUSION

Whether schools' nonresponses to informational requests affect admissions decisions is an open question (Thornhill 2019, 466). Even so, it is easy to imagine that a nonresponse could vitiate the interest of a potential applicant. The consequence would be a subgroup of potential students (politically engaged African Americans) screening themselves out of certain colleges' applicant pools. Regardless, the results speak to social decision-making processes in general. Along these lines, we want to accentuate three points. First, despite the initial impression from the regressions, our results provide no evidence of ordinary racial bias and, if anything, reflect the widespread call for diverse campuses. Second, we find no solid evidence of partisan or political bias in any direction—a finding that is somewhat surprising, given both concerns about the lack of political diversity in higher education and the growing literature documenting such effects. Third and most important is the demonstration of intersectional bias. Political

scientists have focused attention on racial and partisan bias individually—sometimes even comparing them to one another (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). This is an important research agenda but one that would benefit by incorporating the possibility of intersectional biases such as the race \times political bias we find. As minorities continue to garner more political representation, it becomes increasingly important to assess majority group reactions and consider ways to ensure equal access to social and political institutions.

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