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What happens if you ask your legislator about police violence? Experimental evidence on political elites' responsiveness before the US 2020 Elections

Ekkehard A. Köhler[1] and Marius D. May[1]
[1]University of Siegen

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Abstract

We examine the effects of race (black vs. white) and political activism (for vs. against Black Lives Matter) on the legislators' responsiveness to email inquiries about the prevalence of police violence fatalities in their voting districts. We present three main findings. First, legislators do not racially discriminate against black voters in this experiment. Second, they are more responsive if the prevalence of fatalities supports the incumbent's partisan stance on BLM. Third, the more salient the topic "Blacks" in the district the more alert its incumbent is to the email.

Introduction

Are legislators racially biased or are they guided by rational incentives to maximize votes in the upcoming election when they are confronted with inquiries sent from their constituents? Or even both?

A meta-analysis by Costa (2017) concluded that elite responsiveness is not equal across all conditions. Contextual factors such as personal biases of public officials, rather than strategic, electoral considerations affect their responsiveness. In addition to this evidence from political science literature, economic literature on political competition (e.g. Downs, 1957 and Jones et al., 2022) suggests that vote maximization drives the politicians' responsiveness.

We test these priors in a field experiment with fake email requests from voters who are explicitly stating that they are in support of (or in opposition to) BLM and do (not) believe that blacks are killed disproportionately often in police encounters. In addition to the effect of political activism, we are interested in examining the interplay with racially discriminatory behavior by political elites in a racially charged context and therefore vary the racial background of the sender.

Methods and Materials

We field an audit correspondence study (Fix and Struyk, 1993 and Bertrand and Duflo, 2017). We varied the experimental treatments in terms of the constituent's race and the constituent's stance on BLM.

Our data set consists of 4,094 state legislators with an associated contact email address from upper and lower chambers and whose seats were up for election on November 3, 2020. We observe whether we receive a manually written answer or not. The email contained the following text:

Dear [first name last name],
My name is [Deshawn Jackson / Matthew Mueller] and I am concerned about police violence in our district. I [support / oppose] the Black Lives Matter movement and I believe that Blacks are [blank / not] killed disproportionately in police encounters compared to white citizens in any given encounter. To investigate this issue with data from our district I would like to know how many police encounters with black and white citizens were recorded, respectively, in your district in 2019 and how many black and white citizens were killed in these encounters?
Thank you and kind regards,
[Deshawn Jackson / Matthew Mueller]

We retrieved data on police violence victims from the Mapping Police Violence Database, that offers information on these fatalities since 2013. We enriched the data set with data from Google Trends to measure the salience of the issue police violence and BLM.
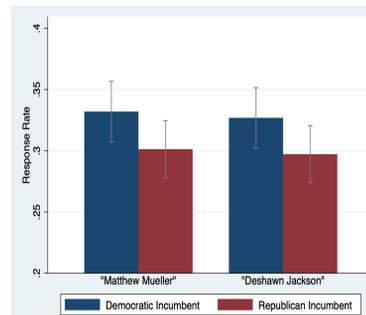
Results

1. Neither Democratic nor Republican legislators racially discriminate against black voters in this experiment.
2. The Democrats' response rate towards BLM supporters is significantly higher compared to BLM opponents. While Republicans tend to reply more often to BLM opponents compared to BLM supporters, the difference is not significant.
3. Legislators are more responsive if the prevalence of fatalities supports the legislator's partisan stance on BLM.
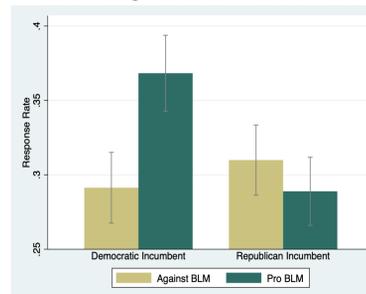4. The more salient the topic "Blacks" in the district the more alert its legislator is to the email.

Contact

Ekkehard Köhler
University of Siegen
Email: ekkehard.koehler@uni-siegen.de
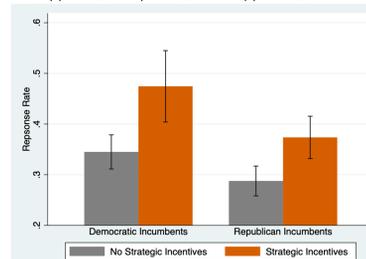Website: https://www.wiwi.uni-siegen.de/wiwi/wid/team/vertretungsprofessor/?lang=de
Phone: +49 (0271) 740 -2930

Results in Graphs

Result 1: No significant discrimination of Blacks

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
Response rate	0.314	0.464	4094
Male candidate	0.677	0.468	4094
Voter Turnout 2016	0.55	0.126	3876
Vote maximizing incentive	0.359	0.48	3318
Incumbent running for re-election	0.785	0.411	4094
Google Trends Blacks 9 months	0.496	0.132	4094

Summary Statistics (above)

Result 4: Incumbents react to "alert" constituents
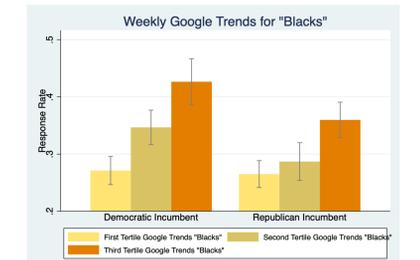DEM and REP legislators are more responsive if the topic is more salient in their district.

Result 2: Partisanship effects:
DEM Legislators are more responsive to BLM supporters compared to BLM opponents.

Vote maximizing incentive conditional on salience: Legislators follow the vote maximizing incentive from result 3 more often if the salience of topic "Black" on Google Trends is high.
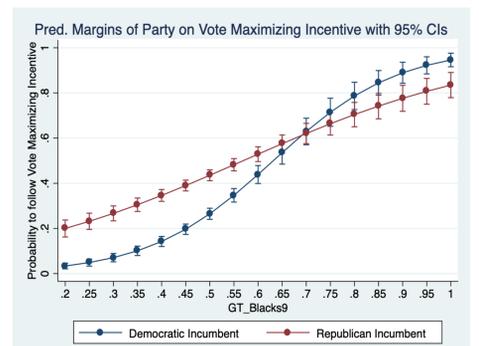

Result 3: Vote maximizing incentive from crime statistic:
DEM and REP strategically respond to constituents:
If the prevalence of fatalities matches with their party's stance towards BLM, legislators have an incentive to respond.

Discussion

We do not find a significant racial bias against black voters. Instead, our findings show that differences in responsiveness can be explained by vote maximizing behavior, i.e., partisanship, strategic information transmission based on the prevalence of police violence in the incumbent's district and the salience of the topic "Blacks".

Some studies assume that specific issues including criminal justice are broadly considered African American issue areas, which might explain why we do not observe a racial bias against the black alias in our experiment (Haney-López, 2014 and Stephens-Dougan, 2020)

We are the first to disentangle partisanship and strategic information transmission with our experimental design. Both aspects are highly relevant in the experiment.

Our study corroborates theoretical work on electoral competition under polarization and work focusing on the salience of issues.

Our findings support the empirical strand of literature that finds that politicians' communication strategies vary with the salience of topics in the incumbent's electorate (e.g. Stier et al., 2018 and Dennison and Geddes, 2019)

Conclusions

This study contributes to the literature as follows: First, we conclude that discrimination is conditional on the issue of the inquiry in correspondence studies. Second, our experiment therefore suggests that vote maximizing incentives related to the issue of the inquiry should always be considered if racial and partisanship effects are examined at the same time.

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