

An Experimental Test of the Effects of Descriptive Representation on Public Attitudes about Local Government

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Abstract:

We report findings from a survey experiment that leverages the diversity of Cook County's Board of Commissioners to assess whether signaling that the respondent is "descriptively represented" on the Board affects their assessments of the Board and other attitudinal outcomes. Thus, we leverage the advantages of experimental designs, but use treatments drawn from respondents' real political context—elected officials who make policy in respondents' county of residence. Our pre-registered design positions us to identify effects of roughly one-eighth of a standard deviation in our full sample, but the estimated effects of signals of ethnoracial- and gender based descriptive representation are null across the five outcomes we consider. However, in pre-registered analysis re-estimating effects by subgroup, we find that descriptive representation significantly affects some attitudes among women and Black respondents. This said, the effect sizes we find in these groups are modest and, in many cases, not statistically distinguishable from those that emerge in other groups.

Research Questions:

Does a signal that a person's representative shares their gender or ethnoracial identity affect their political attitudes?
Do these effects depend on whether the individuals' gender or ethnoracial group has been historically underrepresented?

Descriptive Representation and Governmental Attitudes:

Descriptive representation is the extent to which a person's various identities – their race, gender, social class, sexuality, education – are reflected by their representatives. It is thought have an effect on attitudes toward government institutions, specifically increasing trust and political efficacy. Evidence that increased descriptive representation leads to changes in attitudes toward government official and institutions has been found through both observational and experimental studies at the state and federal levels. These studies offer excellent evidence but have some limitations, observational outcomes might be influenced by personal desire for descriptive representation among respondents who report it, and most previous experimental studies have used hypothetical or fictionalized candidates or representatives.

Experimental Design:

Respondents were randomly presented with a Commissioner with one of six intersecting gender x ethnoracial identities (see below), and were asked a series of questions about the Commissioner and the Board.



Outcome Measures (each rescaled to have M=0; SD=1)

BOARD JOB RATING: How would you rate the job the Cook County Board of Commissioners has done over the past year?

COMMISSIONER TRUST: How much do you trust Commissioners like [TREATMENT NAME] to make good choices in the coming year?

EFFICACY: A) How likely would you be to contact a Commissioner like [TREATMENT NAME] if you had a concern about an issue in Cook County? B) If you contacted a Commissioner like [TREATMENT NAME], how likely is it they would listen to your concerns?

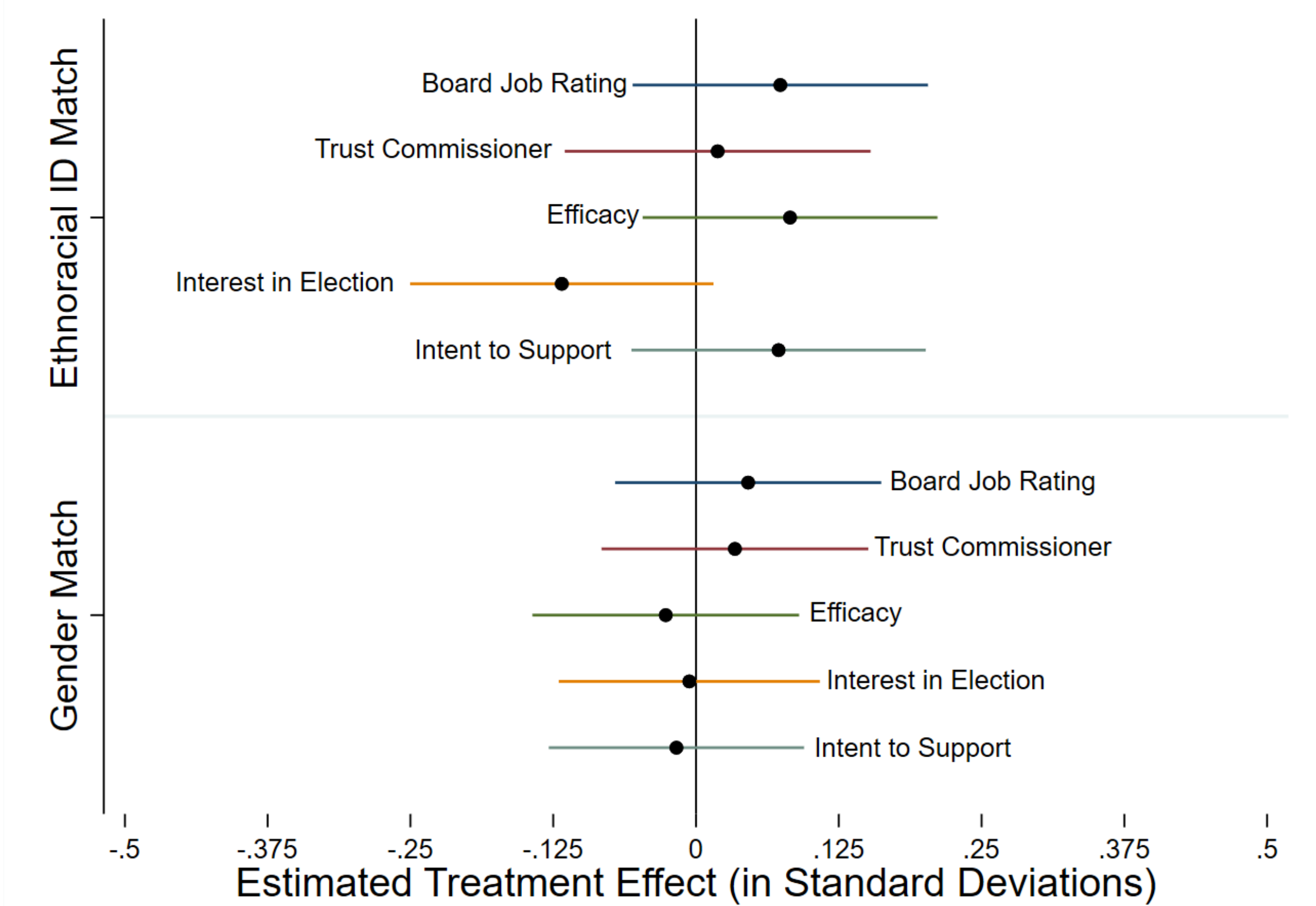
INTEREST IN ELECTION: How interested are you in following the next election for the Cook County Board of Commissioners?

INTENT TO SUPPORT: If [TREATMENT NAME] runs for reelection, how likely would you be to . . . A) contribute to their campaign?; B) vote for them?

References:

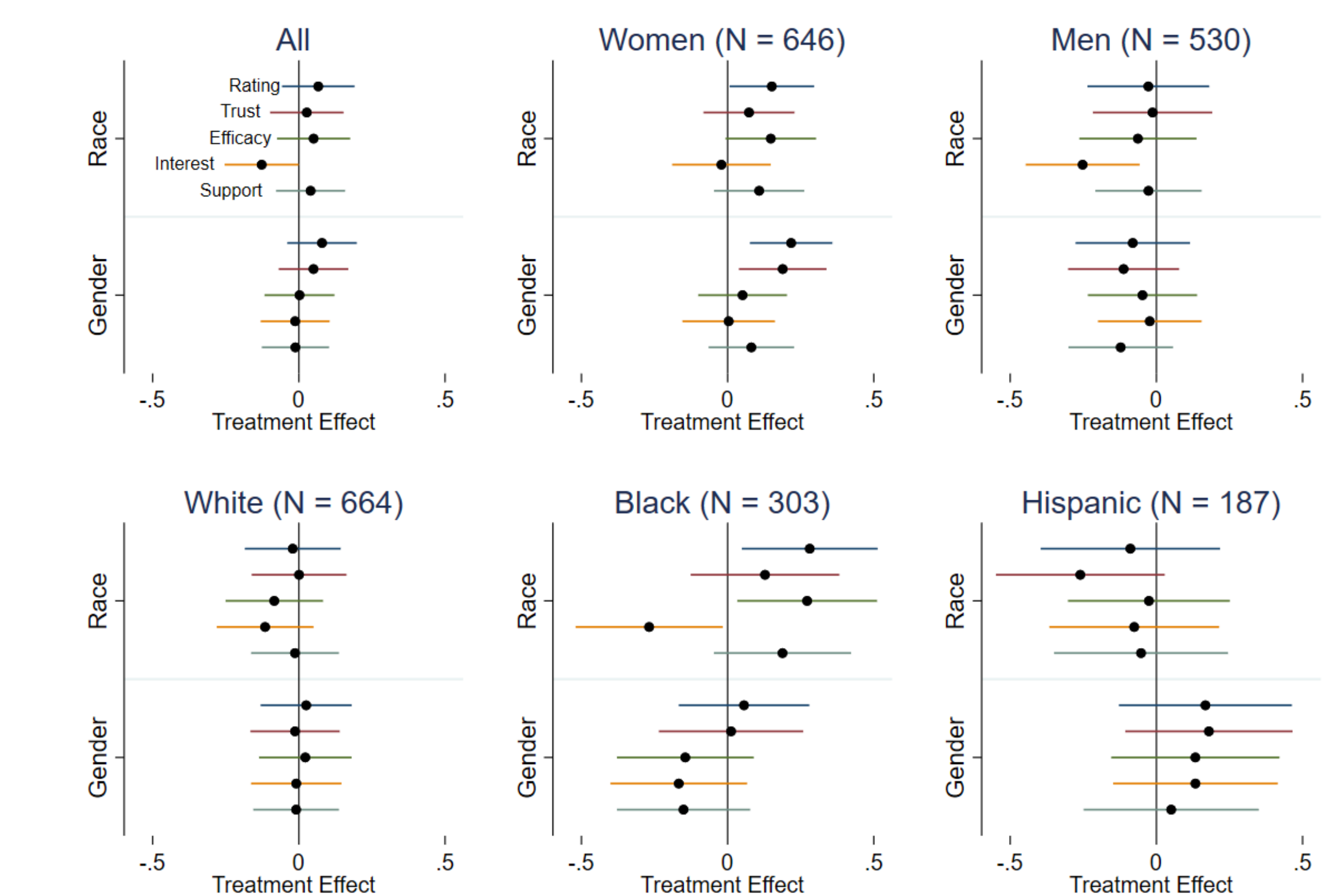
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Pooled Results



Direct Treatment Effects. Markers indicate effects of treatment commissioner's characteristic "matching" respondent characteristic. Outcomes scaled to have means of 0 and standard deviations of 1. Whiskers are 95% confidence intervals.

Results by Subgroup of Respondents



Treatment effects by group. Markers indicate effects of treatment commissioner's characteristic "matching" respondent characteristic. Outcomes scaled to have means of 0 and standard deviations of 1. Whiskers are 95% confidence intervals. * indicates estimated effect among women respondents is statistically distinguishable from effect among men. All other differences in treatment effects across groups $p > .05$.

Conclusions:

Our pre-registered study leverages the diversity of Cook County and the Board of Commissioners. The results are null in the full sample but small effects are present among women and Black respondents. This could reflect enhanced importance of descriptive representation in these groups. Limitations to the study include the treatment design might not reflect the effects of descriptive representation "in the wild"; and Cook County's diversity makes the study possible but might be unique.