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# Local Political Party Voting Context Moderates Public School Principals' Levels of Racial/Ethnic Discrimination

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## ABSTRACT

Correspondence audits document causal evidence of racial/ethnic discrimination in many contexts. However, few studies have examined whether local political party voting context influences individuals to engage in “stakeholder-centric” discrimination on behalf of or in response to expectations of others. We examine heterogeneity in racial/ethnic discrimination by the county-level Republican vote share with a correspondence audit of 52,792 K-12 public-school principals across 33 states. We email principals posing as parents considering a move to the school district and requesting a meeting. We find evidence that the county-level Republican vote share strongly moderates racial/ethnic discrimination against Black and Chinese American families. While all groups are less likely to receive a response from principals as the Republican vote share increases, the declines for Black and Chinese American families are largest. Thus, discrimination against Black and Chinese American families is sizable in counties with the highest Republican vote share. These findings shed light on how partisanship can shape the experiences of historically marginalized groups. Furthermore, there may be benefits to targeting limited resources to geographies where discrimination is more likely to occur.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, correspondence audits have become the *de facto* method for capturing causal estimates of racial/ethnic discrimination (Gaddis, 2018a; 2018b; 2019; Gaddis and Crabtree 2021). A specific type of field experiment that allows scholars to examine the effects of race and ethnicity *ceteris paribus*, correspondence audits are a significant reason for scholars’ increased attention to studying discrimination (Crabtree et al., 2021). Scholars have conducted hundreds of correspondence audits to identify racial/ethnic discrimination across disparate contexts, including employment (Baert, 2018; Gaddis, 2015), housing (Gaddis and DiRago, 2023; Gaddis and Ghoshal, 2015; 2020), and education (Gaddis et al., 2024; Melo et al., 2024). This body of work consistently demonstrates pervasive evidence of racial/ethnic discrimination against Black and Hispanic Americans (Gaddis et al., 2023; Quillian et al., 2017), with a growing body of evidence on discrimination against Asian Americans as well (Gaddis, Crabtree, and Lee, 2024).

Political scientists have embraced audit studies to examine discrimination by elected officials (Block et al., 2021; Hughes et al., 2020; Landgrave and Weller, 2022), other political

party leaders (Hannah, Reuning, and Whitesell, 2022), and street-level bureaucrats (Einstein and Glick, 2017; Giulietti, Tonin, and Vlassopoulos 2019). However, scholars have uncovered mixed findings from these studies. One early meta-analysis found that minorities are about ten percentage points less likely to receive a response from public officials than non-minorities (Costa, 2017). A more recent meta-analysis found no statistically significant effects for Black constituents and a statistically significant small negative effect for Hispanic constituents (Gaddis et al., 2023). Given these conflicting findings and the relatively small number of studies examining racial/ethnic discrimination in this broad area divided over different types of requests, geographies, and types of public officials, additional research is necessary to unpack these forms of racial/ethnic discrimination (see Butler and Crabtree, 2021 for an overview).

One crucial question is how politics shapes racial/ethnic discrimination. A handful of studies have examined this by (a) signaling political party affiliation through a treatment condition (Druckman and Shafranek, 2020; see also Gift and Gift, 2015) or (b) examining differential response rates based on the political party of the contacted official (Butler and Broockman, 2011; Gell-Redman et al., 2018; Hannah, Reuning, and Whitesell, 2022; Kalla et al., 2018). Some evidence suggests that referencing either major political party can depress response rates for Black inquirers (Druckman and Shafranek, 2020). Other work suggests that the contacted official's race and political party may moderate racial/ethnic discrimination. For example, two studies (Butler and Broockman, 2011; Hannah, Reuning, and Whitesell, 2022) find that White Republican and Democratic party officials discriminate against Black constituents at similar rates. However, Gell-Redman and colleagues (2018) found that discrimination against Hispanic constituents was greater from Republican than Democratic party officials.

While individual elected officials might have numerous personal and professional reasons to engage – or not engage – in racial/ethnic discrimination, we can also imagine that *local political contexts* might influence this process. We identified three correspondence audits that analyzed the effects of local voting context on racial/ethnic discrimination, with an additional study that used local voting context as a control only (Giulietti, Tonin, Vlassopoulos, 2019). In the first study, Block and colleagues (2021) find that while discrimination from members of the public is greater against Black people in states with Republican governors, racial discrimination from elected officials against Black people is similar in states with Republican versus Democratic governors. In the second study, Gorzig and Rho (2022) found that discrimination against Black immigrant job seekers increased after the presidential election in 2016. Finally, Hannah, Reuning, and Whitesell (2022) found that responses to campaign volunteer requests were greater in counties with more competitive elections. However, discrimination against Black constituents remained similar regardless of this variable.

Very few correspondence audits have examined local political contexts as a potential moderator of racial/ethnic discrimination. Moreover, to our knowledge, no study has analyzed local political party vote shares. Why might this matter? First, elected officials might feel less able to engage in racial/ethnic discrimination when “every vote counts” in their next election. Second, elected and non-elected officials might feel the need to cater to the majority of their constituents. In this scenario, officials in overwhelmingly Democratic areas might feel pressure to ignore their own potential biases and treat people equally regardless of race/ethnicity. Conversely, officials in overwhelmingly Republican areas might feel pressure to avoid calls of them being too “woke” and actively treat people unequally based on race/ethnicity. Field experiments alone cannot fully adjudicate these potential mechanisms. However, these

propositions provide a starting point for examining a possible moderator of racial/ethnic discrimination.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS**

In this research, we address one primary research question: Does local political party voting context moderate K-12 public school principals' levels of racial/ethnic discrimination toward Black, Hispanic, and Chinese American families? We chose to examine discrimination among K-12 principals because (a) they are essential, widespread, non-elected street-level bureaucrats, (b) they represent a critical government touchpoint in the community for millions of American families of all racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, and (c) few correspondence audits to date have examined this population (although, see Pfaff et al., 2021; Rivera and Tilcsik, 2023). This research builds on our prior study using the same data to examine aggregate racial/ethnic discrimination and heterogeneity by resources (Gaddis et al., 2024). Our research joins a few prior studies that examine whether local voting contexts moderate racial/ethnic discrimination (e.g., Block et al., 2021; Hannah et al., 2022) but is the first to examine discrimination against multiple racial/ethnic groups over a large sample size and broad geographic context to test for moderation by local political party vote share.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

We conducted a correspondence audit by emailing the principals of 52,792 regular, operational, non-charter, public K-12 schools in 33 U.S. states (i.e., AL, AR, CA, CO, DE, FL, GA, IA, ID, IL, IN, LA, MA, MI, MN, MO, MS, NC, ND, NE, NH, NJ, NM, NY, OH, RI, SC, TN, TX, VA, VT, WA, and WI). These states represent the entire universe for which we could obtain principals' email addresses through direct contact with or publicly available information online from state Departments of Education.

We emailed each principal in the sample, claiming to be a parent moving to the area, looking at several neighborhoods, and requesting a meeting with staff to learn more about their school. Our primary treatment condition in this experiment was the race/ethnicity of the email sender. We randomly assigned one of four racial/ethnic identities – White, Black, Chinese American, or Hispanic – for each email (~25% of sent emails per condition). Per standard conventions for correspondence audits (Gaddis, 2023), we used names to signal the race/ethnicity of each family with separate but racially/ethnically matched names for both the parent and child stated within each email. We chose first and last names that are commonly perceived at high rates as belonging to an individual from the appropriate racial/ethnic group (Crabtree and Chykina, 2018; Crabtree et al., 2022, 2023; Gaddis, 2017a; Gaddis, 2017b; Gaddis, Kreisberg, and Crabtree, 2023). We sent only one email to each principal to avoid experiment discovery (Larsen, 2020; Vuolo, Uggem, and Lageson, 2018) using a scripted email design to automate and standardize sending our messages (Crabtree, 2018; Fumarco et al., 2024).

Our primary moderator variable of interest is the county-level proportion of Republican voters from the 2014 federal midterm election – the most recent federal election before data collection – using data from the Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections (Leip, n.d.). We also merged in a census-tract level variable for the proportion of non-White residents from the American Community Survey (ACS) using pre-treatment (i.e., 2014) estimates. Finally, we included additional controls for the signaled gender of the student mentioned via the name in the email and additional treatment conditions for whether the student’s family previously qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) and whether the child is an English as a second language (ESL) student.

Our primary dependent variable is whether the recipient positively responded to the email request, similar to prior correspondence audit studies sending a request for information. We recorded all responses and re-coded them into a binary variable: a positive email response became a “1,” and a negative or no email response became a “0.” Our overall positive response rate across all treatment conditions was 48.7%, which is in line with prior studies (Costa 2017).

To determine the effect of our race/ethnicity treatments and the moderator effect of county-level Republican vote share, we estimate an ordinary least-square (OLS) model. We use linear regression over logistic regression for interpretability and because recent research has shown that linear regression is preferable for many reasons (Gomila, 2021; Hellevik, 2009); our conclusions remain unchanged, however, if we use logistic regression. We regress our binary outcome measure for whether we received a positive principal response (our dependent variable) on our race/ethnicity treatment indicators (our primary independent variables) and county-level Republican vote share (our primary moderator variable) while controlling for additional non-race/ethnicity treatment indicators (i.e., gender, FRL, and ESL signals). We examine two regression models: with and without an interaction of the race treatments with the county-level Republican vote share moderator. We use robust standard errors to account for possible heterogeneity in our error term. The reference category across all models is the “White” racial condition. Our analysis examines these regression coefficients and the predicted response rates obtained using the `postestimation margins` command in Stata 17.0.

We translate the response rate estimates from our Stata margins output into discrimination ratios, defined as the response rate for White parents divided by the response rate of the three other racial/ethnic profiles separately. Each racial/ethnic response rate is the number



of positive responses divided by the number of total emails sent for that profile. This is represented by the following equation:

$$DR_{wm} = \frac{\frac{r_w}{n_w}}{\frac{r_m}{n_m}}$$

Where  $DR_{wm}$  is the discrimination ratio for Whites ( $w$ ) and racial/ethnic group  $m$ ,  $r_w$  is the number of positive responses for White parents,  $n_w$  is the number of total emails sent for White parents,  $r_m$  is the number of positive responses for racial/ethnic group  $m$  parents, and  $n_m$  is the number of total emails sent for racial/ethnic group  $m$  parents. After calculating each discrimination ratio, we transform this measure using the natural logarithm of the discrimination ratio. This allows us to work with a dependent variable that is approximately normally distributed. When calculated this way, the discrimination ratio is a relative, rather than an absolute, measure that allows for straightforward interpretation across different groups.

Beyond the discrimination ratios, we must calculate the sampling variance of the estimate of each discrimination ratio. Using dichotomous data and a risk ratio outcome measure, the equation to calculate the variance is:

$$\text{Var}(DR_{wm}) = \frac{1}{r_w} - \frac{1}{n_w} + \frac{1}{r_m} - \frac{1}{n_m}$$

Where  $DR_{wm}$  is the discrimination ratio Whites ( $w$ ) and racial/ethnic group  $m$ ,  $r_w$  is the number of positive responses for White parents,  $n_w$  is the number of total emails sent for White parents,  $r_m$  is

the number of positive responses for racial/ethnic group  $m$  parents, and  $n_m$  is the number of total emails sent for racial/ethnic group  $m$  parents.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows the results of the regression models with and without interactions between the race/ethnicity treatment conditions and the county-level Republican vote share variable. First, Model 1 shows that principals are less likely to respond to Chinese American and Hispanic families ( $p < 0.05$ ). Moreover, the county-level Republican vote share and the census tract-level proportion of non-White residents are negatively associated with response rates. Second, Model 2 shows that while the Republican vote share has a negative effect for White families, the interactions for Black families ( $p < 0.10$ ) and Chinese American families ( $p < 0.001$ ) are statistically significant and negative as well. These results suggest that racial/ethnic discrimination may be greater for some groups in counties with larger Republican vote shares.

<insert Table 1 about here>

In Figure 1, we plot these results using the postestimation margins command in Stata 17.0 to visually examine the aggregate response rates and estimates in counties with 20%, 40%, 60%, and 80% Republican vote shares. We selected these values because roughly 50% of the sample falls between 40% and 60% Republican vote share, and about 95% of the sample falls between 20% and 80% Republican vote share. Thus, these results give a more easily digestible view of the moderating effect at important cut points and the extremes. The results shown in Figure 1 visually support the regression results from Table 1. Although the response rates for each group decrease as the county-level Republican vote share increases, the decrease for Black and Chinese American families is larger. Thus, the gaps between the White response rate and the Black and Chinese American response rates increase in counties with larger Republican vote shares.

<insert Figure 1 about here>

Finally, in Figure 2, we show the discrimination ratios for White/Black (Panel A), White/Chinese (B), and White/Hispanic (C) family comparisons. These figures provide a metric that accounts for changes in response rates across multiple groups simultaneously at the same levels of Republican vote share shown in the previous figure. In Figure 2, we see that while discrimination against Black families is not statistically significant in the aggregate, it is statistically significant in counties with Republican vote shares of 60% (Discrimination Ratio = 1.05) and 80% (DR = 1.09). In other words, White families receive responses to their inquiries to principals at rates between 1.05 to 1.09 times higher than Black families in those types of counties, respectively. Figure 3 shows county-level Republican vote share moderates discrimination against Chinese American families and ranges from DR=1.13 in 20% Republican vote-share counties to DR=1.37 in 80% Republican vote-share counties. Finally, in Figure 4, we see no significant moderation of discrimination against Hispanics by the county-level Republican vote share.

<insert Figure 2 about here>

While our design does not permit identifying the mechanisms driving this politically important treatment effect heterogeneity, we can imagine several possible underlying causes. One is that principals, on average, share the political attitudes of their broader communities. In this case, we would expect to see principals in more Republican areas exhibit the type of exclusionary attitudes that characterize contemporary party positions on things like diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), immigration, policing, and welfare. Another possibility is that principals feel obliged to faithfully represent the perceived preferences of their communities. Thus, principals might not share the political attitudes of those in their districts but might feel

that they should mirror them to keep employment or succeed in their position. Third, principals in Republican areas might assume that non-White families would be more prone to request costly or burdensome accommodations or object to existing curricula and policies.

## **DISCUSSION**

Although correspondence audits are generally regarded as providing gold-standard causal evidence for the existence of discrimination, very few have examined local political contexts as a potential moderating factor of racial/ethnic discrimination. This paper examined county-level Republican vote share as a moderator of discrimination among K-12 public school principals. We found that while overall response rates among principals dip in counties with higher Republican vote shares, these rates decrease more for Black and Chinese American families than for White and Hispanic families. Thus, discrimination is statistically significantly greater for Black and Chinese American families in counties with higher Republican vote shares.

These findings have important implications for both policymakers and scholars alike. First, government agencies have limited resources to monitor racial/ethnic discrimination and enforce laws where applicable. There may be benefits to targeting such limited resources to geographies where racial/ethnic discrimination is more likely to occur. Second, scholars should consider examining local political party voting context as a potential moderator of racial/ethnic discrimination across other contexts as well. Third, advocates should uphold policies designed to counter educational bias and inequalities nationwide.

We think this is particularly true now, after President Trump's election in 2016 and the subsequent political events and behaviors. There has been a troubling rise in blatant discrimination, exclusionary White nationalism, and anti-immigrant sentiment in many parts of America that traditionally support Republican candidates (Blee, Futrell and Simi 2024). Given

this, the discrimination we identify in those conservative partisan areas is likely stronger now. To positively identify this, we need more field experiments on racial/ethnic discrimination that examine the effect of partisanship.

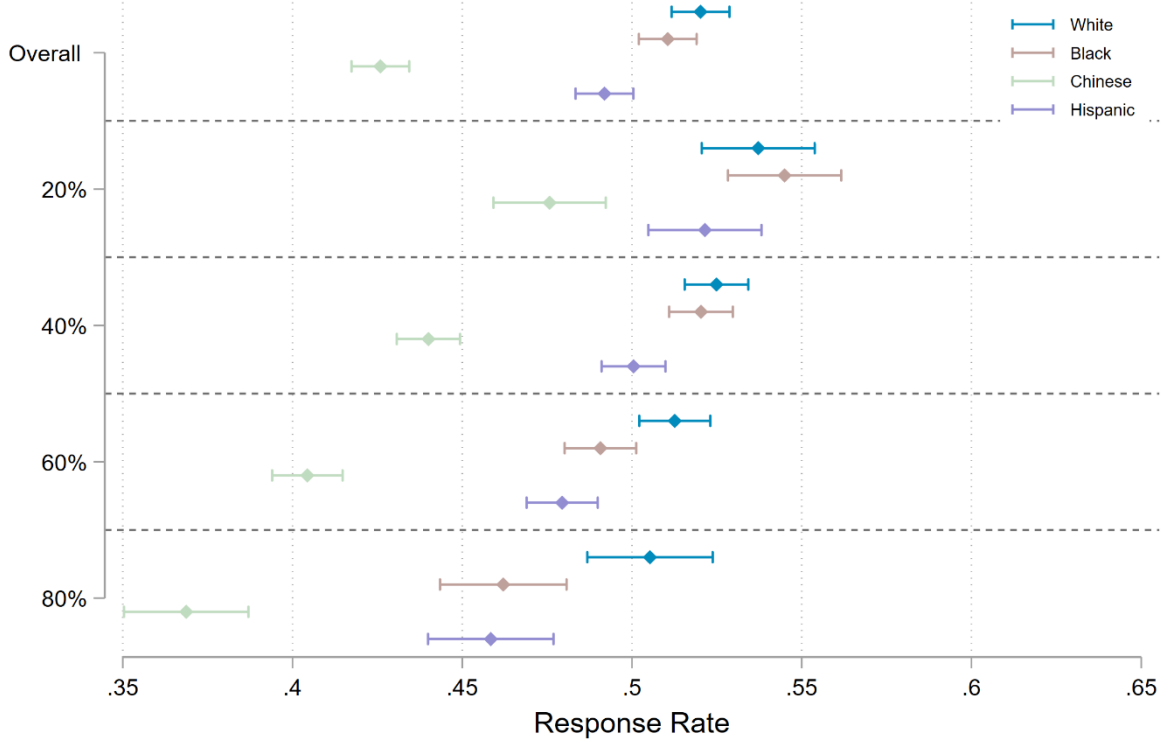
## TABLES AND FIGURES

**Table 1. Regression Results**

	OLS Model (1)	OLS Model (2)
Race		
Black	-0.009 (0.006)	0.020 (0.019)
Chinese	-0.099*** (0.007)	-0.043* (0.019)
Hispanic	-0.033*** (0.007)	-0.012 (0.019)
Republican Vote Share	-0.117*** (0.014)	-0.061* (0.026)
Race*Republican Vote Share		
Black*Republican Vote Share		-0.062* (0.037)
Chinese*Republican Vote Share		-0.117*** (0.036)
Hispanic*Republican Vote Share		-0.044 (0.037)
Female	0.001 (0.004)	0.001 (0.004)
FRL Signal	-0.010* (0.004)	-0.010* (0.004)
ESL Signal	0.009 (0.006)	0.010 (0.006)
Census Tract Non-White	-0.191*** (0.007)	-0.191*** (0.007)
Constant	0.660*** (0.009)	0.633*** (0.014)

**Note:** + =  $p < 0.10$ , \* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ ;

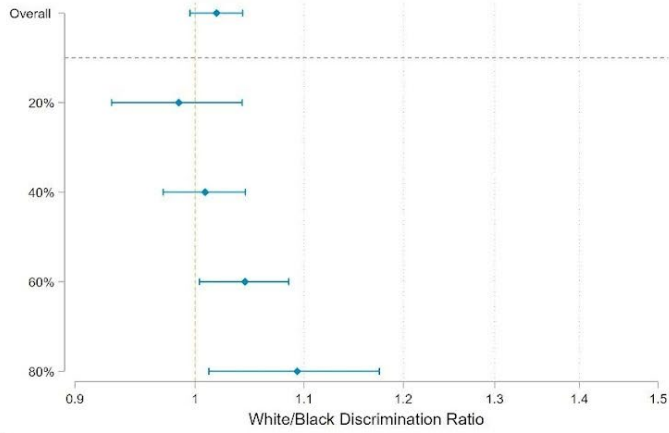
**Figure 1. Response Rates by Republican Vote Share**



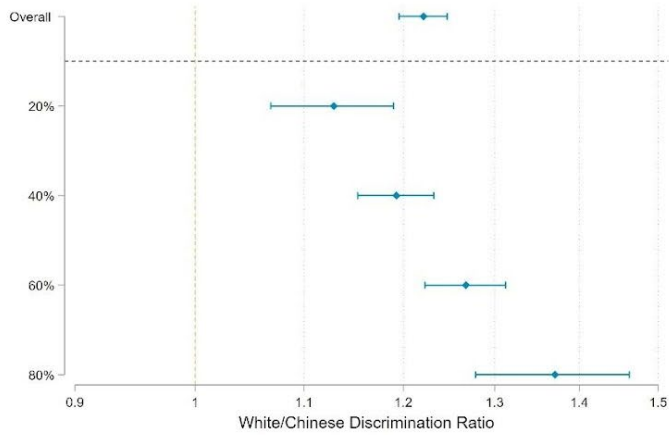
**Note:** Points are predicted response rates and horizontal lines are the 95% confidence intervals. The underlying model (shown in Table 1) is an OLS regression model that includes an interaction between race/ethnicity treatment indicators and Republican vote share, a set of other experimental treatments and pre-treatment covariates, and is calculated with robust standard errors.

**Figure 2. Discrimination Ratios by Republican Vote Share**

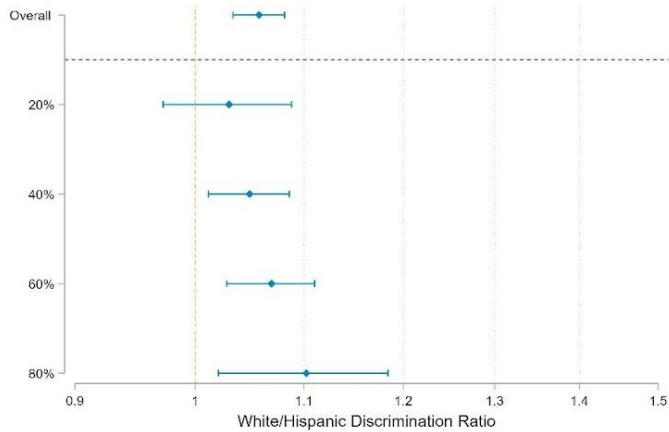
A.



B.



C.



**Note:** Points are predicted discrimination ratios and horizontal lines are the 95% confidence intervals. The underlying model (shown in Table 1) is an OLS regression model that includes an interaction between race/ethnicity treatment indicators and Republican vote share, a set of other experimental treatments and pre-treatment covariates, and is calculated with robust standard errors. Results shown on a natural log scale. Results that overlap the gold line at 1 indicate no statistically significant evidence of discrimination.



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