Descriptive Legitimacy and International Organizations: Evidence from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Despite the growing importance of race and gender on legitimacy in domestic settings, few studies have investigated this issue among international organizations. We examine this relationship through a survey experiment of American citizens' response to an investigation of U.S. refugee policy by a fact-finding team sponsored by the UNHCR in the aftermath of the 2018 Central American refugee crisis along the Mexico-U.S. border. Overall, we find that UNHCR investigation panel composition that has a racial and gender balance are generally perceived as the most legitimate. Greater racial and gender diversity consistently increases public perceptions of fairness and trust in the UNCHR panel. Second, the impact of diversity is conditioned upon the nature of the UNHCR panel report. In the context of a undesirable report, greater gender and racial diversity increases respondent's acceptance of panel investigations, suggesting that descriptively representative panels improve the perception of substantive legitimacy of panel decisions.

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Introduction

Recent scholarship on diversity and representation in the United States domestic context has explored how the composition of political institutions affect people's perception of institutional legitimacy (Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo 2019; Scherer and Curry 2010; Eckhouse 2019; Sen 2015). Termed as descriptive representation, the composition of political decision-making bodies is considered crucial for the effective functioning of democratic governments, because gender and racial under-representation have been longstanding issues for democratic legitimacy around the world. Descriptive representation posits that "to be viewed as legitimate by all segments of society, a political institution must mirror the image of that society" (Scherer and Curry 2010, 91).

While many studies have empirically shown the effect of descriptive representation on people's perception of institutional legitimacy at the domestic level, there are very few empirical studies that examine how it affects people's perception of institutional legitimacy at the international level. Indeed, legitimacy dynamics for international institutions are still "insufficiently recognized, conceptualized, and explained in standard accounts of international cooperation" (Tallberg and Zürn 2019, 582). While more recent empirical works have investigated how people perceive international organization (IO) legitimacy through public opinion surveys, more work needs to be done to specify exactly what causal mechanisms influence legitimacy dynamics in IOs (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015; Johnson 2011; Schlipphak 2015; Voeten 2013). This paper addresses this gap and investigates whether the race and gender composition within an IO affects people's perception of the legitimacy of said IO. Particularly, we are interested in how race and gender intersect to influence people's perception of different dimensions of IO legitimacy, which has yet to be sufficiently investigated in prior research (Simien 2007, 264).

Here, we propose that descriptive representation in terms of gender and racial diversity overall would affect different dimensions of IO legitimacy differently. On the one hand, descriptive representation should increase an institution's procedural legitimacy because greater gender and racial balance would increase perceptions that different voices are represented in the decision-making process. This argument assumes such diversity may exhibit greater empathy and less bias. On the other hand, when an institution's substantive legitimacy is strong, such as it has produced desirable outcomes in the eyes of the public (Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht 1997; Mondak and Smithey 1997), then descriptive representation matters less at the institutional level. On the flip side, just as Hayes and Hibbing (2017, 47) argues, descriptive representation can compensate for the lack of substantive legitimacy by improving the symbolic nature of such representation.

To test this argument, we carry out a survey experiment of American citizens' response to an investigation of U.S. refugee policy by a fact-finding team sponsored by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the aftermath of the 2018 Central American refugee crisis along the Mexico-U.S. border.[1] We chose this case because refugee policy in the U.S. is closely associated with the general phenomenon of racial diversity within the U.S., and it is a highly salient issue that affects several dimensions of U.S. society, such as the degree of "whiteness" and the influence of multiculturalism. For these reasons, the refugee issue should be prominently associated with the effect of descriptive representation on institutional legitimacy. As other studies on women's representation have shown, women's impact generally shows up in certain issue areas that are gender-specific (Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo 2019). Importantly, in issue areas such as refugee policy, identity politics should also be highly salient (Bansak, Hainmueller, and

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[1] For UNHCR work on the topic see https://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2536?y=2018#year

Hangartner 2016; Czymara and Schmidt-Catran 2017). Thus, a UNHCR investigation of U.S. refugee policy can properly test the relationship between perceptions of diversity and legitimacy in IOs. However, the scope of our claims is limited: we do not argue that such descriptive representation would have similar effects in IOs that specialize in other issue domains, such as military and security issues (Lawless 2004).

Overall, we find that UNHCR investigation panel composition that has a racial and gender balance are generally perceived as the most legitimate. Three specific findings stand out from our empirical results. First, regardless of how the UNHCR-led investigation panel reports, greater racial and gender diversity consistently increases public perceptions of fairness and trust in the UNCHR panel, suggesting that greater diversity conveys the message to observers that the institution is procedurally operating appropriately. Second, the impact of diversity is also conditioned upon the nature of the UNHCR panel report. In the context of a undesirable report, greater gender and racial diversity in the composition of the panel increases respondent acceptance of the outcome of the UNHCR panel's investigations. This suggests that descriptively representative panels improve the perception of substantive legitimacy of panel decisions. Third, we explore the heterogenous effects of how respondents' partisanship shape the impact of diversity on IO legitimacy and find limited partisanship effects.

Our paper makes two key contributions. First, it contributes to the literature that links public opinion and foreign policy (Kertzer 2021). Although conventional wisdom holds that public opinion does not affect foreign policy, many recent studies draw a closer link between the two. For example, the microfoundation of many IR theoretical models rely on public opinion (Kertzer 2017), and can be linked directly to foregin policy making (Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo 2020). In our case, public perceptions of IO legitimacy should matter because they would affect elite decision-making in relation to these IOs, such as participation in these

IOs as well as compliance with decisions made by such IOs (Dai 2005; Buchanan and Keohane 2006). Second, we contribute to a broader understanding of the effect of descriptive representation by exploring how race and gender intersect to affect institutional legitimacy. Conventional studies of descriptive representation tend to exlucisvely focus on either race (Scherer and Curry 2010; Kaslovsky, Rogowski, and Stone 2019) or gender (Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo 2019). However, there is lack of research exploring the intersection of both race and gender on institutional legitimacy (Holvino 2010).

The paper proceeds as follows. It first locates the theoretical lacunae of descriptive legitimacy at the level of IOs. Then, it unpacks how descriptive legitimacy affects procedural and substantive dimensions of institutional legitimacy. The paper next discusses the selection of the Central American refugee crisis for the U.S. and our rationale for using this as the scenario for the UNHCR investigation in our experimental study. It then presents the survey experimental design and research results with a further discussion on robustness. The paper concludes with a reflection on how greater gender and racial diversity in IOs would improve overall perceptions of their legitimacy.

Descriptive Representation and IOs

Studies of descriptive representation within the domestic context have gained a great deal of scholarly attention. Set within the debates about different dimensions of legitimacy, descriptive characteristics, including race, ethnicity, gender, and religious affiliation, have been identified as crucial links between political institutions and increasingly multicultural societies. Mansbridge, for example, defines descriptive representation as those "not only visible characteristics, such as color of skin or gender, but also shared experiences" (Mansbridge 1999, 629). Many political theorists posit that in order to be viewed as legitimate, political institutions and their representatives should mirror the social compositions of society at large (Scherer and Curry 2010). Particularly for historically under-

represented groups, such as women and racial minorities, descriptive representation would enhance institutional goodwill and thus improve overall legitimacy.

Empirically, many studies have tested the effect of descriptive representation on people's perception of institutional legitimacy. For example, scholars have explored whether racial representation would enhance people's perceived legitimacy of domestic courts in the U.S. and found that greater representation of Black judges leads to a higher perception of legitimacy among African Americans, but has the opposite effect among White Americans (Scherer and Curry 2010). Support for co-racial candidates has also been found to be consistent among White Republicans and Black Democrats for nominees to the Supreme Court (Kaslovsky, Rogowski, and Stone 2019), or have varying implications for different racial and ideological groups (Badas and Stauffer 2018). Where gender is concerned, studies have demonstrated that greater representation of women in the government improve female citizens' attitudes toward government responsiveness (Atkeson and Carrillo 2007), but surprisingly, women's equal representation may also legitimize decisions that go against women's interests by conferring institutional trust (Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo 2019). Whether women from different racial backgrounds perceive legal procedure as just has also been found to be dependent on the racial background of the prosecuting attorney (Baker et al. 2015). Outside the American context, comparative politics scholars have also found the positive effect of women's descriptive representation in other democratic countries (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005; Schwindt-Bayer 2010). Although equal representation does not mean equal voice (Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014), greater representation of women in many instances have led to increased political engagement of women (Barnes and Burchard 2013).

Extending this logic to the international level, we ask if descriptive representation has similar effects for IOs given existing studies on IO legitimacy tends to revolve around

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procedural versus substantive grounds (Tallberg and Zürn 2019). Here our study borrows from Scherer and Curry (2009)'s differentiation of procedural versus substantive dimensions of institutional legitimacy, whereby the former emanates from the fairness of the process, while the latter depends on the substantive outcomes it has produced (Scherer and Curry 2010, 90–91).

Domestically, descriptive representation is meant to amend past wrongs specific to the underrepresentation of women and racial minorities in a political system historically dominated by White males. We argue that a similar logic can be applied in the international system, where historically White Europeans and their settler countries, including the U.S., have played a dominant role (Vitalis 2015). This was the global "color line" in international relations once identified by W.E.B Du Bois (1961), which effectively kept the rest of the world outside of this Euro-centric international order until the mid-20th century (Bull 2002; Gong 1984; Keene 2002; Suzuki 2009). The founding of the UN in 1946 tried to reform this international order by making racial equality one of its founding principles (Búzás 2021).

Yet equal representation at IOs remains a thorny issue, such as the veto power of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) and influence of Western powers in a few prominent IOs. For example, many developing countries criticize the leadership of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund regarding the unequal representation and lack of governance reform in these organizations due to different voting weights within these two international institutions (Güven 2017; Vestergaard and Wade 2015; Woods 2000). There are also campaigns focusing on the representation of the UN Secretary General, who exerts a strong influence on legal discourses in global politics (Johnstone 2003, 441), suggesting the importance attached to representation in the UN (Haack 2018).

Our Theoretical Framework

In the domestic context within the U.S., descriptive representation often means more participation of women and ethnic and racial minorities. At the international level, descriptive representation might imply more countries from the global south participating in international governance and the representation of more women compared to the preexisting patriarchal political order. Such representation conveys important information for audiences. Previous studies have used the information mechanism to explain how voting patterns within the UNSC send different signals for domestic audiences in cases of authorization of use of force (Chapman 2007; Fang 2008; Grieco et al. 2011; Tago 2005; Thompson 2006; Voeten 2005). For example, vetos against the U.S. by China or Russia versus traditional American allies like the U.K. and France influence American public perceptions of the UNSC legitimacy differently (Matsumura and Tago 2019).

In terms of descriptive representation at IO, we argue representation of diverse racial groups would give people confidence that the IO's decision-making process involves many non-western countries in particular, and that these representatives would make a decision that takes to heart the interests of refugees, who are often from the global south. Likewise, the representation of women would give people confidence that the IO would reflect interests beyond patriarchal-related ones such as traditional national security issues to encompass broader issues such as refugee protection. Furthermore, we contend such effect should be the strongest at the intersection of race and gender, meaning combined race and gender diversity should convey information of more inclusiveness and impartiality compared to single race/dual gender and single gender/multiple race representations where either of those categories could be lacking. Indeed, race and gender are simultaneous processes of identity that define how individuals see themselves as well as how others see them in organizations (Holvino 2010, 262). Therefore, gender and racial representation simultaneously should

convey information that the composition of the IO is more inclusive and thus will be more impartial compared to a single dimension of race or gender.

Therefore, we propose the following first set of hypotheses:

H1a: Greater gender diversity within an IO panel increase its legitimacy.

H1b: Greater racial diversity within an IO panel increase its legitimacy.

H1c: Greater gender and racial diversity within an IO panel would have a positive and multiplicative effect on its legitimacy.

Aditionally, we argue greater descriptive representation in an IO should should have varying effects on perceptions of different dimensions of institutional legitimacy. First, at the international level, the representation of different racial groups in an IO indicates that many countries and their opinions are represented. Likewise, the representation of women would indicate that the interest of women have been taken under consideration. Hence, we argue that the inclusion of racial and gender diversity should increase the perception that procedurally, the decision-making process is more inclusive due to the participation of a variety of voices and interests, which are critical for perceptions of procedural legitimacy for international organizations (Dellmuth, Scholte, and Tallberg 2019, 7). Diversity of representation should also increase an audience's confidence in the impartiality of the decision-making process, which for "some international organizations…may be the chief institutional source of legitimacy" (Dellmuth, Scholte, and Tallberg 2019, 9).

However, we argue whether the composition of the IO panel would matter is also conditional upon what the panel does. If a decision made by an IO panel is considered desirable by the audience, then the composition of the IO panel should not matter for the audience, since the substantive legitimacy of the IO has already been satisfied. Indeed, studies have found that descriptive representation affects the willingness of audiences to accept outcomes that would be considered undesirable but has no effect on desirable ones in

domestic contexts (Arnesen and Peters 2018; Hayes and Hibbing 2017). Applying this logic to IOs, depending on whether a decision made by an IO panel is perceived as desirable or undesirable for the audience, then the gender and racial composition of the IO panel's impact on legitimacy will vary:

> H2a: Greater gender and racial diversity within an IO panel would increase perception of procedural legitimacy of the panel regardless of the panel's decision.

> H2b: Greater gender and racial diversity within an IO panel would increase legitimacy perception for substantively undesirable outcomes but have less impact on desirable ones.

The UNHCR and the Refugee Crisis near the U.S.-Mexican Border

This paper tests these hypotheses on a hypothetical scenario of a refugee crisis near the U.S.-Mexican border, which triggers a fact-finding mission sent by the UNHCR. We selected this scenario to satisfy the conditions of both mundane and experimental realism. For the former, the then Trump administration's anti-immigration stance and extensive media attention on Central American refugees traveling to the U.S. through the Mexican border lend credence to potential refugee crises affecting the U.S.[2] Since UNHCR fact-finding missions require host country consent, it is more realistic for Mexico to accept a UNHCR investigation team than for Washington to give consent. This issue is salient given the importance placed on refugees by the border for Americans, a critical condition for experimental realism (Druckman and Kam 2011). Thus, a refugee-related scenario provides the best context to observe how descriptive representation in an IO would affect public perceptions of its legitimacy.

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[2] See "Taking Migrant Children From Parents Is Illegal, U.N. Tells U.S.," *The New York Times,* 5 June 2018.

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U.S. public perceptions of the UN often fluctuate with different American administrations. For example, according to a poll in May 1992, 45 percent of Americans thought the UN was doing a good job, with conservatives and men ranking the UN higher than liberals and women. The reason for such support was the UN Security Council's backing of the U.S.-led Gulf War against Iraq, with conservatives and men more likely to support the use of force compared to liberals and women.[3] Since 2003, when the U.S. invasion of Iraq was not authorized by the UN, American disapproval of the UN ballooned, according to a Gallup Poll in 2009.[4] Although American perceptions of the UN have varied throughout the years, they increasingly reflect a polarized U.S. domestic political landscape.

For example, during the Trump administration, the U.S. government vowed to cut funding from several prominent UN bodies, such as the World Health Organization, and withdrew from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in October 2017 and June 2018 respectively. Such hostile attitude towards the UN in fact had clear partisan divisions the U.S., where 41 percent more Republicans compared to Democrats had a negative view of the UN (77% vs. 36%). Indeed, the share of Republicans who had a favorable view of the UN was at its lowest point in almost 30 years of Pew Research Center surveys.[5] Studies have shown that popular support can empower national leaders to overcome domestic opposition

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[3] "Conservatives, Men Support UN, US Poll Shows," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 13 May 1992.

[4] See https://news.gallup.com/poll/116347/united-nations.aspx.

[5] "United Nations Gets Mostly Positive Marks from People around the World," Pew Resaerch Center, September 23, 2019, see https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/23/united-nations-gets-mostly-positive-marks-from-people-around-the-world/

to their foreign policy goals (Flores-Macías and Kreps 2017; Gelpi and Grieco 2015). Thus, the lack of support among the Republicans may have emboldened the Trump Administration's policies towards the UN. Thus, experimental realism combined with the increasingly prominent role of public opinion on U.S. immigration and foreign policy, particularly for IO legitimacy, underlies our decision to test our hypotheses with a refugee scenario involving the UNHCR.
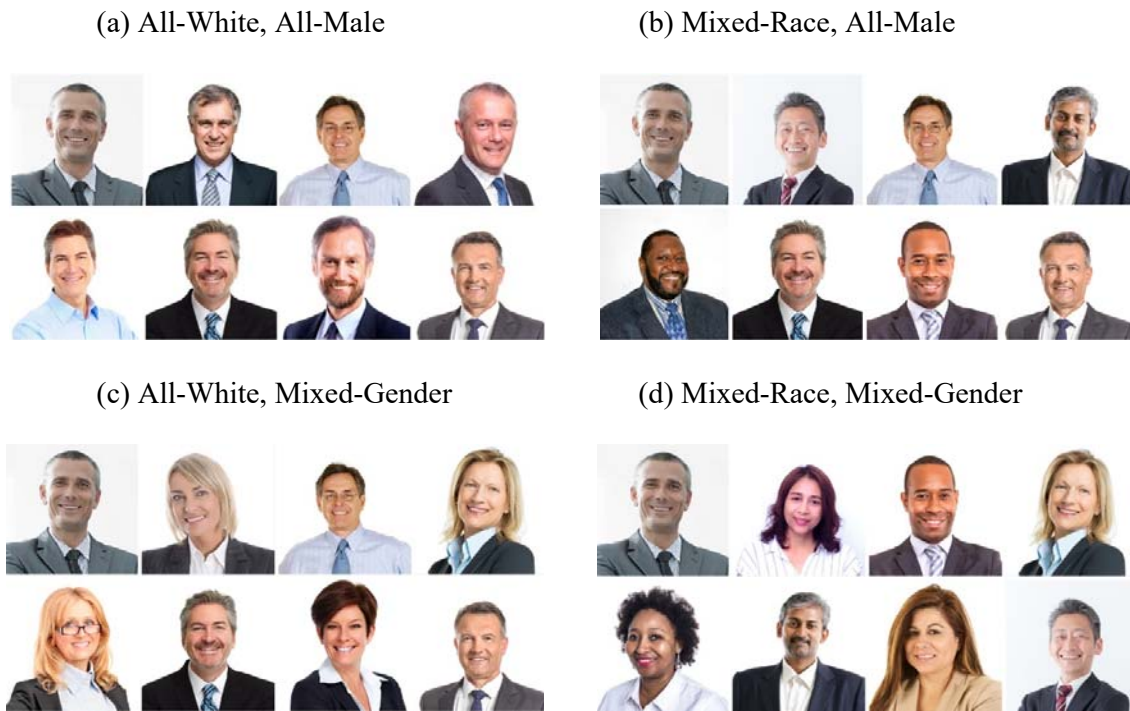
Experimental Design

Prior studies that examine the effect of descriptive representation at IOs have usually relied on qualitative and normative case studies and mass public opinion data. Empirical results from these studies cannot distinguish prior individual perceptions of said organizations and the effect of descriptive representation.[6] In contrast, our approach—an experimental research design—represents an important contribution to the existing literature on descriptive representation and IOs by isolating the specific effect that different levels of racial and gender diversity within an IO (UNHCR) have on public support and perceptions of legitimacy of an international body.

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[6] For example, a survey found that Americans overestimated the percentage of Black representation in the U.S. Congress. See (Tate 2003) A similar problem might also exist in conducting mass surveys for the UN since the UNHCR public statement specifically emphasize that "[they] we apply an age, gender, and diversity (AGD) approach to all aspects of [their] work." See UNHCR Age, Gender, and Diversity Policy (https://www.unhcr.org/protection/women/4e7757449/unhcr-age-gender-and-diversity-policy.html).

Figure 1: UNHCR Investigation Panel, by Racial and Gender Distribution

(a) All-White, All-Male

(b) Mixed-Race, All-Male

(c) All-White, Mixed-Gender

(d) Mixed-Race, Mixed-Gender

Notes: This figure displays the four different UNHCR panels based on racial and gender distribution of the eight-person panel.

Our experimental design follows a 4x2 factorial design where the treatment varies between two different dimensions: UNHCR report and descriptive representation. We construct a refugee scenario affecting the U.S. in which a UNHCR fact-finding panel comes to investigate the U.S. processing of refugees at the American-Mexican border. Specifically, respondents viewed the following vignette with accompanying pictures of the UNHCR investigation panel:

Consider a future scenario in which the U.S. experiences a large influx of refugees on its southern border. Many of these refugees end up waiting to be processed in detention centers in Mexico before being transferred to the U.S. Several human rights groups have accused the U.S. government of delaying the transfer of these refugees, which has led to overcrowding in Mexican detention facilities. Moreover, there are scattered reports of women and children being abused. In response to these growing

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reports, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) sends an independent investigation team to Mexico. This team is composed of a panel of eight experts to evaluate the detention facilities and processing of the refugees (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 illustrates each of the four potential panels that respondents viewed. Respondents were randomly assigned to a panel composed of an eight-person team with four racial and gender groupings: all-white, all-males (1a), mixed-race, all-male (1b), all-white, mixed-gender (1c), and mixed-race, mixed-gender (1d). The pictures were purchased royalty-free from Shutterstock where we selected generic, middle-aged professionals of different racial and gender profiles. To ensure comparability across age, appearance, and likeability attributes, we selected the final pictures from a fifty-picture pretest (see Appendix A1 for more details).

After viewing this prompt, respondents received either a report that is critical of U.S. efforts in processing refugees or one that is not. We varied the report type since some respondents may see a report critical of U.S. policy as desirable while others will not. The randomized report types are italicized in brackets, respectively, below:

After a four-week review of the facilities, the panel reports that they found [*no evidence of women and children being mistreated and are satisfied / substantial evidence of women and children being mistreated and are dissatisfied*] with the processing of refugee transfers between the U.S. and Mexico. The panel [*does not see the need for the U.S. / sees a pressing need for the U.S.*] to expedite the transfer of refugees between Mexico and the US.

We fielded the survey using the online crowdsourcing firm Lucid, which was administered to 2,557 adult American citizens in August 2019. Lucid is similar to another popular platform, Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), but its online survey population has

been gaining steady recognition as substantially more representative of the national population in the U.S. compared to MTurk. In a comparison study of Lucid and MTurk, Coppock and McClellan (2019) replicate and extend the seminal study of online Mturk markets by Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz (2012), and they find that Lucid's baseline demographics compared to MTurk is more representative and closer demographically to probability samples obtained from the 2012 American National Election Studies (ANES). For our sample, gender, education, race, and income are broadly similar to recent U.S. census data with the exception that our sample has slightly fewer non-white Hispanics and is better-educated (see Appendix A2 for more details). Our sample is consistent with issues common to online samples from MTurk: it tends to be younger and better educated compared to more representative national surveys, but unlike MTurk, stratified sampling from a larger pool of respondents ensures that our sample does not deviate too strongly from representative, national populations, making our data more similar to a national sample (Huff and Tingley 2015; Chandler et al. 2019).

As discussed earlier, our measure of legitimacy focuses on two aspects: perceptions of procedural and substantive legitimacy. For procedural legitimacy, we construct a pair of questions asking whether the panel can be trusted and whether the decision was fair. As for substantive legitimacy, we ask respondents about the outcome with respect to refugees and U.S. citizens.[7] While asking specific questions contrasts with prior studies that use a battery

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[7] Specifically, we ask respondents the following five-point Likert scale question: (1) "How fair or unfair was the decision-making process?"; (2) "How much do you do trust the UNHCR panel to make the right decisions for refugees?; (3) "Do you agree or disagree that the UNHCR panel made the right decision for the refugees?"; (4) "Do you agree or disagree that the UNHCR panel made the right decision for American citizens?"

of questions (Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo 2019; Scherer and Curry 2010), our method avoids the problems associated with relying on factor analysis to generate an underlying variable that may suffer from multicollinearity and linear correlation. Specific and pinpoint questions are our preferred approach, as the interpretation of these responses does not rely on sometimes arbitrary data-exploration techniques.[8]

Evaluating hypotheses 2a and 2b require measuring outcomes that respondents find desirable or not. There is no obvious prior expectation on which type of UNHCR report that Americans find desirable: either a critical one that criticizes U.S. handling of refugees or a non-critical one that finds no fault. In fact, some Americans may find a critical report desirable while others would prefer a non-critical report. Thus, to measure the perceived substatntive legitimacy of the outcome, we randomly assigned half of the survey respondents to view a critical report while the other half view a non-critical one. Then, we ask participants to evaluate the report's outcome for Americans and refugees, which determines perceived substantive legitimacy.

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[8] While we prefer to use the direct results of our questions to avoid problems associated with factor analysis, we also employed analyses using variables constructed from factor analysis, which yielded qualitatively identical results (see Table A7 in Appendix A4 for more details).

Figure 2: UNHCR Report and Legitimacy Outcome Measurements

(a) UNHCR Is Fair

(b) UNHCR Can Be Trusted

(c) Outcome Good for Refugees

(d) Outcome Good for Americans
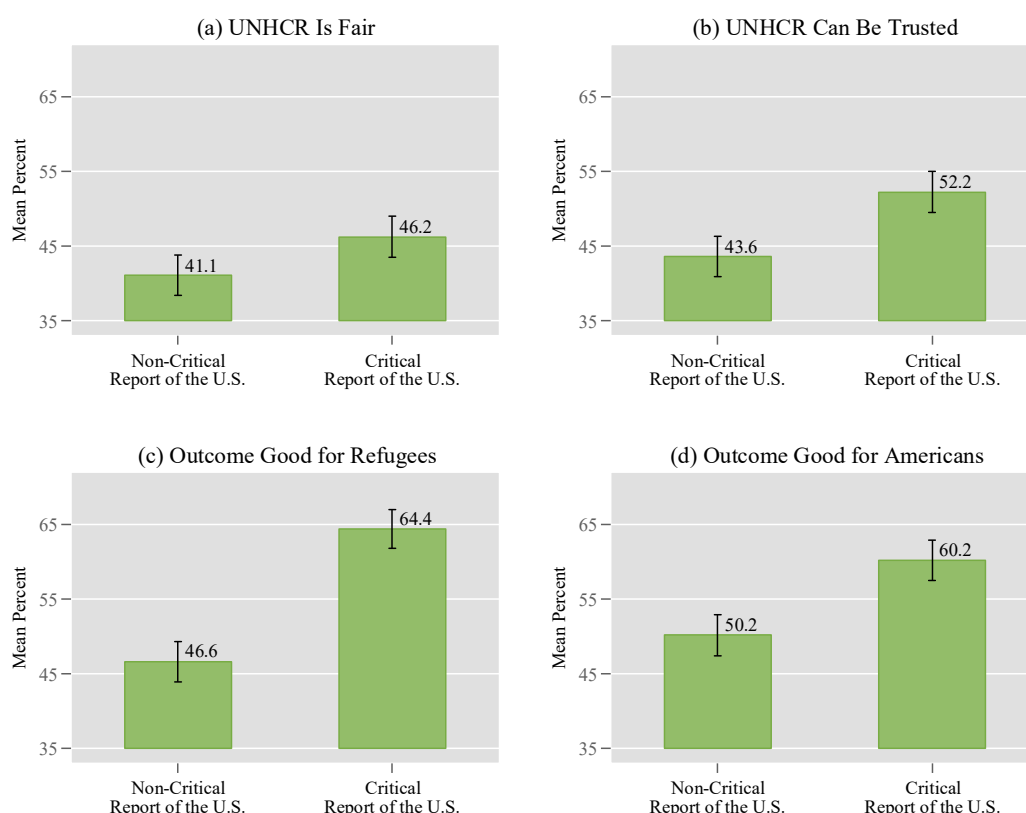
Notes: Figure 2 plots the respondents' mean agreement level (five-point Likert scale) to our four main outcome measurements with accompanying 95% error bars for positive and negative UNHCR reports on U.S. handling of refugee processing. Figure 2a asks respondents whether the UNHCR decision-making process was fair, while Figure 2b asks if the UNHCR can be trusted to protect the interests of refugees. Figures 2c and 2d ask respondents if the outcome was good for refugees and U.S. citizens, respectively.

Figure 2 reveals evidence of how different reports of the U.S. government's handling of refugee processing affected respondent evaluations on both the procedure and substantive outcome of the UNHCR panel investigation. The vertical axis for all sub-figures displays the percent of respondents who agreed with the procedural and substantive statements of the UNHCR panel report. The top half (2a and 2b) depicts our two measures of procedural legitimacy, respondent opinion on whether the UNHR panel decision-making process was

fair and if the UNHCR panel can be trusted. The bottom half (2c and 2d) displays our two

measures of substantive legitimacy, respondent opinion on whether they agree if the outcome

is good for refugees and U.S. citizens, respectively. Each sub-figure is further split into two

treatment groups: UNHCR panel report critical versus non-critical of the U.S. processing of

refugees.

Generally, UNHCR panel report that is critical of U.S. handling of refugee processing

led to higher agreement by respondents on the legitimacy of the UNHCR. In the top half of

Figure 2, the procedural measurement statements show that 46 and 52 percent of respondents

agreed that the critical UNHCR panel report was fairer and more trustworthy, respectively. In

contrast, the non-critical report garnered slightly lower agreement on fairness and trust

statements (41 and 43 percent, respectively). As for substantive legitimacy, the critical report

yielded an overwhelming 64 and 60 percent agreement among respondents that the UNHCR

panel report's outcome was good for refugees and Americans, respectively.

These results mirror the complex range of American public sentiment, where

approbation or disapproval of by an IO such as the UNHCR toward the U.S. may be

perceived as desirable or undesirable depending on respondent political attitudes. Thus,

respondent agreement on whether the outcome was good for refugees and Americans

determine our measure on the desirability of the outcome. This allows us to effectively test

H2b, i.e., the legitimacy enhancing effects that descriptive representation has on undesirable

outcomes. We also run the analysis with post-treatment controls such as respondent

demographics like gender and party identification.[9]

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[9] Analyses using a battery of demographic characteristics such as respondents' gender,

political party affiliation, income, age, self-identified racial identity, anti-immigration

Main Results

Figure 3: Descriptive Representation and Legitimacy of UNHCR Panel
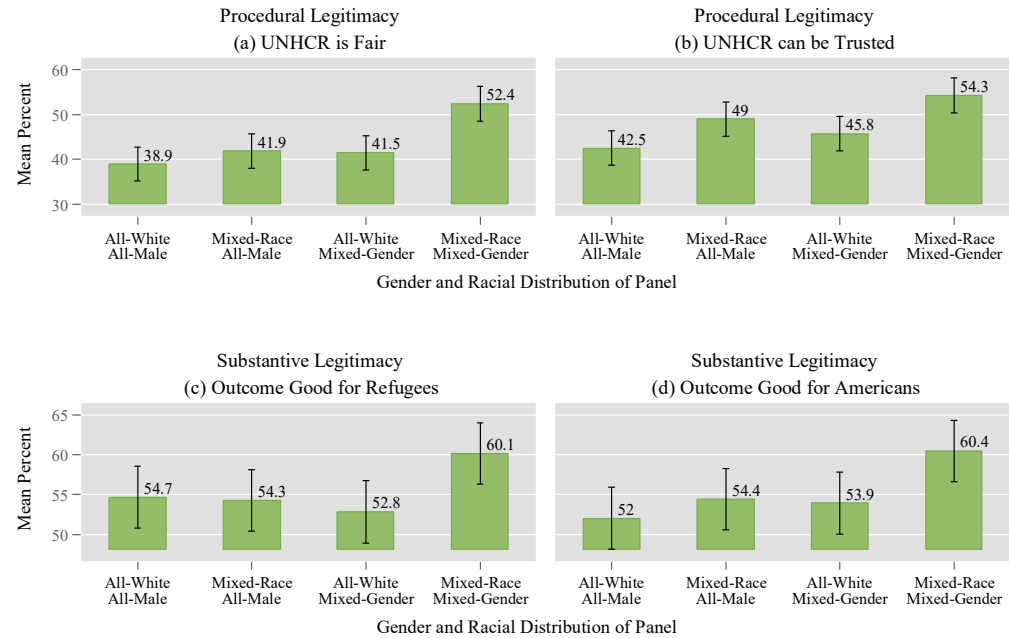

Figure 3 displays the mean percent of respondents who agreed with the four statements about the UNHCR panel regarding fairness, trust, and outcomes for refugees and Americans. Consistent with our argument, these results demonstrate that greater gender and racial diversity in the UNHCR panel compositions increase respondent evaluations of fairness (3a) and trust (3b) of the UNHCR panel's decision-making process. Regarding H1a and H1b, the legitimacy enhancing effects from balanced panels in only one dimension (race or gender) were statistically indistinguishable from the all-white, all-male panel except for the all-white, mixed-gender panel on the trustworthiness of the UNHCR (3b). Our results on the single-dimension effect of diversity indicate little or no support for H1a and H1b.

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sentiment, patriotism, and our measurement of white nationalism can be found in Appendix A3 with greater description on the operationalization of these variables.

In contrast, when testing for H1c, we find robust support that the presence of a mixed-race, mixed-gender panel significantly increased respondent perceptions of procedural and substantive legitimacy. Respondents rated the mixed-race, mixed-gender UNHCR panel about 13.5 percent fairer (3a) and around 12 percent more trustworthy (3b) compared to the all-white, all-male panel. Moreover, decisions made by the mixed-race, mixed-gender panel are also consistently viewed as a better outcome for refugees (about 6 percent more) and Americans (roughly 8 percent more) compared to the all-white, all-male panel. Taken together, these results suggest that the intersection of gender and race are required to improve the legitimacy of an IO. Lacking in either gender or racial diversity leads respondents to view the UNHCR panel as less inclusive and more partial.

Figure 4: UNCHR Panel Diversity and Procedural Legitimacy
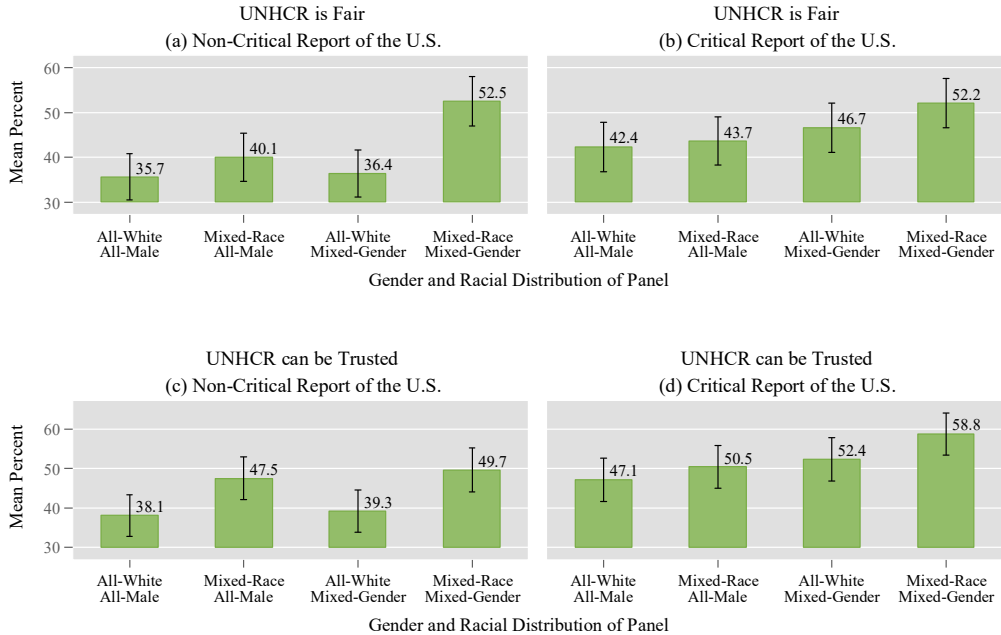
As for testing H2a and H2b, whether greater diversity affects procedural and substantive legitimacy differently, we test these hypotheses by correlating the type of report issued by the UNHCR panel with respondents' expectations of a desirable outcome. Figure 4

displays the results of H2a on whether descriptive representation increases respondents'

perception that the UNHCR panel is fair or can be trusted with each pair of subfigures split

by whether the report is critical of the processing of refugees by the U.S. government. The

vertical axis for each subfigure displays the percentage of respondents who agree whether the

UNHCR panel is fair or can be trusted. The top part of Figure 4 displays the statement that

the UNHCR decision-making process was fair while the bottom part shows the statement

related to whether UNHCR can be trusted. Each part of the figure is further broken down into

a non-critical report (4a and 4c) and critical report (4b and 4d).

Overall, the all-white, all-male panel had the lowest fairness and trust ratings while

the mixed-mixed panel had the highest ratings. The mixed-race, all-male and all-white,

mixed-gender panels were rated slightly higher in trust and fairness but not significantly

different from the all white, all-male panel. Whether the UNHCR panel issued a non-critical

or critical report did not influence whether the mixed-mixed panel increased perceptions of

procedural legitimacy but did affect its magnitude. For example, the mixed-mixed panel had

a 16.8 and 9.8 percent difference in fairness compared to the all white, all-male panel for

critical (4a) and non-critical reports (4b). These results support H2a that greater diversity in

both gender and race improves procedural legitimacy regardless of the desirability of the

outcome. The combined effect of race and gender from our study suggests that both are

needed for the legitimacy-improving effects of descriptive representation, which is consistent

with our results from H1c.

Moving onto how descriptive representation affects substantive legitimacy, Figure 5

displays how descriptive representation affects respondents' agreement with the statement

that the outcome was good for refugees (top half) and Americans (bottom half). The figure is

split into non-critical (5a and 5c) and critical (5b and 5d) UNHCR panel reports. The vertical

line displays the proportion of respondents who agree with the outcome statement, and the horizontal axis displays the different UNHCR panel treatment groups.

**Figure 5: UNCHR Panel Diversity and Substantive Legitimacy**
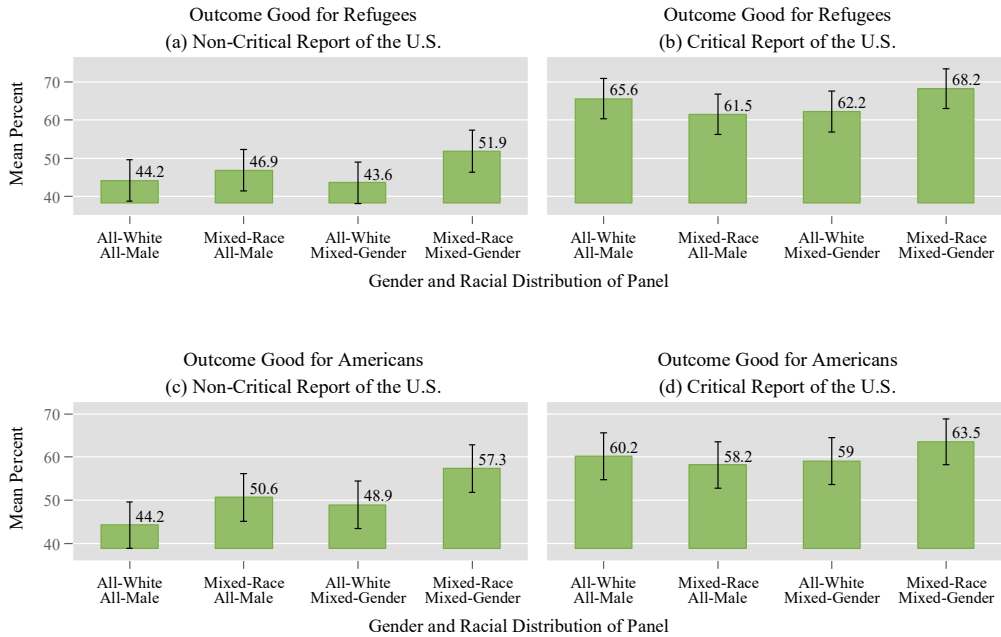
Overall, we find robust support for H2b that a more racially diverse and gender-balanced panel improves respondents' agreement that the outcome was good for refugees and Americans only when the UNHCR panel issued a non-critical report on U.S. handling of refugees. Specifically, the mixed-mixed panel had a 7.7 (5a) and 13.1 (5c) percent difference in agreement among respondents that the outcome was good for refugees and Americans, respectively. In contrast, when the UNHCR issues a critical report, the racial and gender composition of the panel does not significantly affect respondent agreement on whether the outcome was good for refugees (5b) or Americans (5d). The combined effect of race and gender from our study suggests that both are needed for the legitimacy-improving effects of descriptive representation, which is consistent with H1c.

These results lend support for H2b on the conditional effect of diverse gender and racial representation on substantive legitimacy. Taken together, the conditionality findings are similar to results by previous studies on conditional gender effects (Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo 2019). Our findings build on these prior studies by elaborating on the importance of the intersection of gender and race on institutional legitimacy for IOs.

Heterogeneous Effects

Figure 6: UNHCR Report and Legitimacy Outcome Measurements, by Partisanship
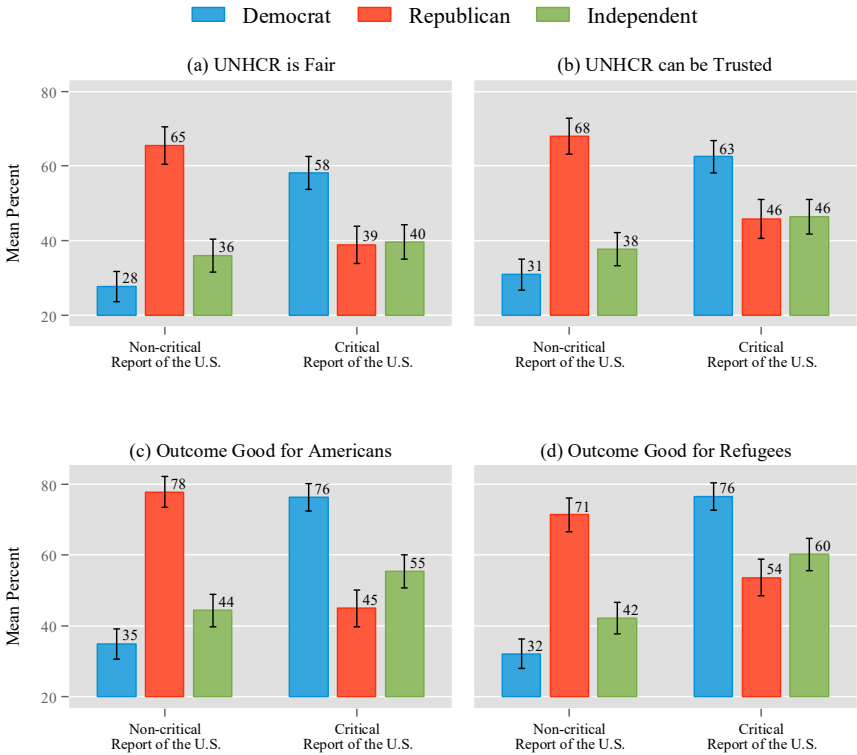
In this section, we test for conditional average treatment effects by respondents' prior political attitudes on their perception of UNHCR legitimacy. One of most common political attitudes is party identification in the U.S.. Figure 6, which depicts respondent mean agreement on our legitimacy outcome measures split by UNHCR reports and respondent

partisanship,[10] shows that Democrats view the outcome as more legitimate if the UNHCR report is critical of the U.S., while the opposite is true for Republicans.

For example, on procedural legitimacy, the majority of Democrats believe that the UNHCR is fair (58 percent) and can be trusted (63 percent) if the report is critical of the U.S. while the majority of Republicans will consider the UNHCR fair (65 percent) and trustworthy (68 percent) only for non-critical UNHCR report of the U.S. Perceived substantive legitimacy pattern remains the same with an overwhelming number of Democrats perceiving the outcome as good for Americans and refugees with the critical report, but Republicans generally somewhat indifferent or slightly favorable for when the UNHCR concludes with a non-critical report. These results suggest that on the issue area of immigration, legitimacy is conditioned by respondent partisanship.

To explore heterogenuous effects of partisanship further, consider Figure 7, which displays the marginal difference in agreement for the legitimacy measures between the all-white, all-male panel and other diverse panels separated by Democrats (blue), Republicans (red), and Independents (green). Here, the mixed-race, mixed-gender panel is perceived as significantly more legitimate than the all-white, all-male panel for Democrats and Independents (7a to 7d), but for Republicans, the diversity panel effects are insignificant.[11]

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[10] We categorized Democrat and Republican as all respondents who considered themselves Democrats and Republicans, and Independents as everyone else. An alternative method is to also lump those independents that lean to either party as the partisans as well, which is a common practice as most Americans are not really independents. See "Political Independents: Who They Are, What They Think," *Pew Research Center* 2019 March 14 for further discussion. Our results do not change for either coding (see Appendix A7).

[11] For detailed discussion of the partisanship effects, please see Appendix A7.

Figure 7: Conditional Marginal Treatment Effects of Diversity, by Partisanship
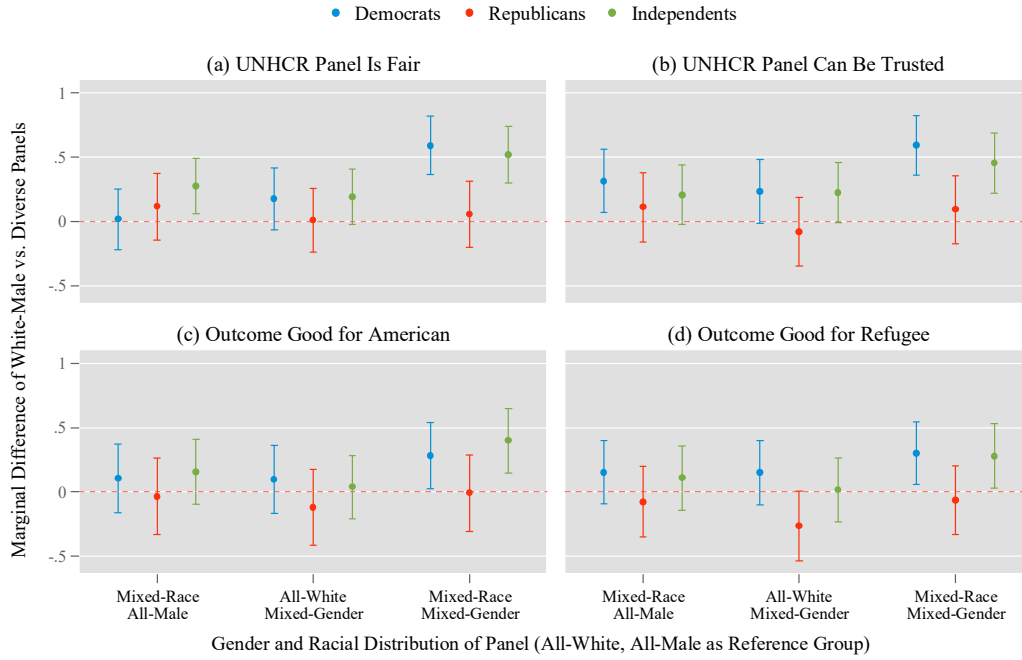
Robustness Checks

In this section, we evaluate the robustness of our results. We examine pre-treatment effects followed by an investigation on whether our photos cue nationality rather than descriptive representation.[12] To address pretreatment effects and nationality cues, we fielded an additional survey in October 2021 on 2,901 U.S. adult citizens through Lucid marketplace. In this followup survey, we first replicated our original survey design, but also introduced one

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[12] A third concern for our results is respondent attentiveness, which has been shown to impact surveys conducted on Lucid's platform (cite). We address this issue with a simple knowledge instruction question, which 76 percent of the sample passed and compare the attentive and non-attentive respondents. Our results are consistent for the attentive respondents. However, it should be noted that the high pass rate could generate statistical power concerns for inattentive respondents (see Appendix A6 for more details).

more set of treatments by adding country labels to the pictures to address the concerns of nationality cues on the photos (see Appendix A2).

As discussed earlier, the timing of our main survey in 2019 and the media coverage on immigration during the Trump administration could introduce pre-treatment effects, which could potentially underestimate treatment effects for respondents viewing repetitive information (Druckman and Leeper 2012), or overestimate such effects if respondents hear new and opposing information compared to existing media reports (Linos and Twist 2018). The strength of the pre-treatment effects, however, will depend on the similarity between the experimental design and the media reporting of the issues at hand. Given that our scenarios focus on the UNHCR, which received minimal coverage in domestic U.S. media, pre-treatment effects influencing our results should be minimal.

Nevertheless, we addressed potential pre-treatment effects in several ways. First, we compared how our diversity treatments affected respondents who regularly consume political news compared to those with minimal consumption and found no difference (see Figure A5 and Appendix A6 for further discussion). Second, in the follow-up survey, we replicated our findings under a new U.S. administration in 2021. This indicates our main findings in the main survey were not an artifact of the heightened media environment during the Trump administration.

The follow-up survey results are displayed in Figure 8, which shows the relationship between UNHCR diversity and our legitimacy measures across three samples—the 2019 sample (green), the 2021 sample replication without country labels (blue), and 2021 replication sample with country labels (red).[13] The vertical axis depicts the marginal

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[13] We also replicated the results found in Figures 4 and 5 above in our followup survey. For more details, see Appendix A6.

treatment effect between an all-white, all-male panel compared to the diversity panels while the horizontal axis displays the specific diversity panel in question. We were able to replicate our results in 2021 (see blue figures) for both procedural legitimacy measures and for one of the substantive legitimacy measures (refugee outcome).[14] Comparing the 2019 (green) and 2021 (blue) sample, the point estimates and accompanying confidence intervals broadly overlaps, indicating that our results are consistent across two U.S. presidential administrations: mixed-mixed UNHCR panels compared to all white, all-male panels are perceived as more legitimate.[15]

Additionally, we have sought to address concerns that our photos might cue nationality rather than racial or gender effects given the UNHCR is an international body.[16] In the followup survey, we replicated the original experimental design but attached country labels to each photo. These country labels were comprised of four European and four Latin American countries. Our selection criteria consisted of countries that were ethnically diverse (for further details, please see Appendix A3). The introduction of the country labels do not change our results. Figures 8a, 8b, and 8d show similar point estimates and confidence

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[14] We were unable to replicate the substantive measure on whether the outcome was good for Americans, which may explained by how respondents view this question differently in 2021 than in 2019.

[15] Our surveys fielded in late August 2019 and October 2021 occurred during periods of different refugee attention by the media with a focus on Central American refugees in 2019 and Afghan refugees in 2021. This is reflected in the Google trends popularity index in the U.S. for search words "refugee" or "asylum" having above average scores of 58 from August 25 to 31, 2019 and 76 from October 17 to 23, 2021 (https://trends.google.com/trends).

[16] We thank anonymous reviewers for pointing this out.

intervals between the 2019 sample (green) and the 2021 sample with country labels (red), which provides evidence that race and gender cues are driving our results rather than nationality cues.

Figure 8: UNHCR Diversity and Legitimacy Replication Comparison
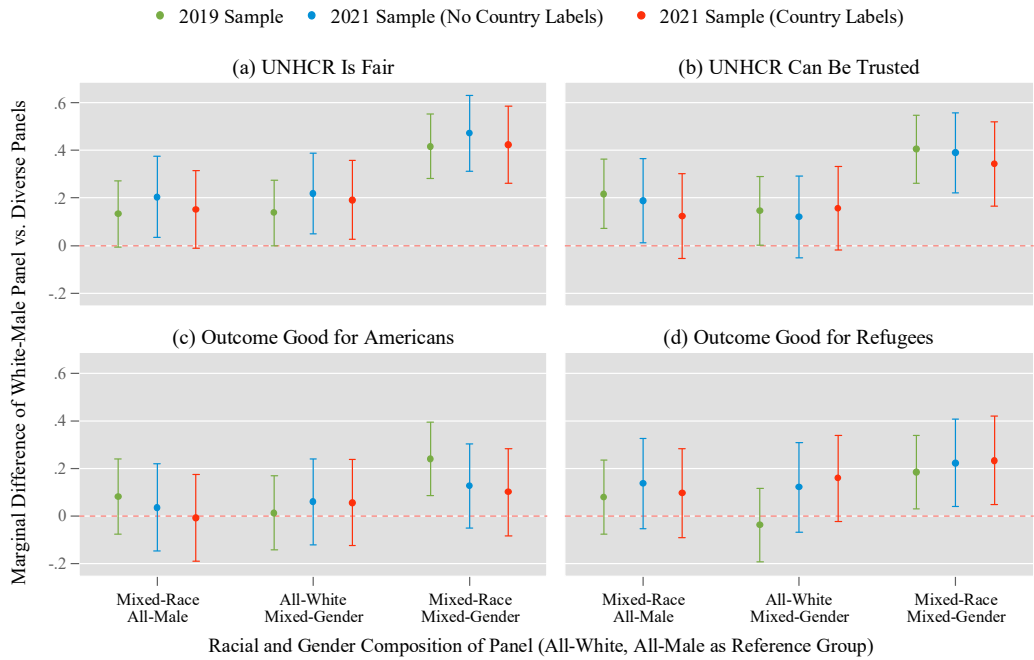
Conclusion

Our study makes several contributions to the literature on racial and gender representation in IOs. This study is one of the first that sheds light on how descriptive representation within an IO such as the UNHCR can affect perceptions of legitimacy among domestic audiences. Of particular importance, our study found empirical evidence that domestic audiences' willingness to tolerate perceived undesirable outcomes depends on the extent of descriptive representation within an IO, at least to an American audience. A central policy implication of this result suggests that continued emphasis on policies that promote diversity have legitimacy-enhancing benefits for IOs.

Does descriptive representation increase perception of legitimacy in IOs? The answer from our study in the United States is yes. Our results indicate that, independent of the outcome, greater gender and racial balance in a UNHCR panel improves the procedural legitimacy of said institution through perceptions of more inclusive participation. Even when the realized outcome does not match domestic audiences' preferences, descriptive representation can make such undesirable outcomes more tolerable. These results have important implications for the study of domestic politics and IOs.

However, there are some caveats: the scope of our study where descriptive representation matters will occur in issue domains such as immigration, which we believe is highly associated with diversity. For example, other studies have found that women leaders and legislators are less likely to be given the benefit of doubt in issue areas pertaining to national security, a traditionally more masculine issue domain (Schroeder 2017). Furthermore, we acknowledge that our data are U.S.-centric, and it is possible that we are captruing how Americans transfer ideas about the legitimating role of diversity onto international organizations. This is not the same as broad perception of legitimacy in the international system around the world, and citizens in different countries may subscribe to different types of IO legitimation rationales. We believe that a future avenue of research should focus on how descriptive representation influences other types of IOs and issue areas as well as whether it matters in a similar way in different national contexts.

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