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BRING BACK THE POLITICS TO ADMINISTRATION: CITIZEN ATTITUDES OF DEI IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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"Believe you can and you're halfway there."

—President Theodore Roosevelt

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Abstract

In recent years, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) policies have become central to the United States' cultural and political battles. A once viewed as aspirational policy goal, has now been redefined by conservative rhetoric as a partisan threat to meritocracy, academic freedom, and traditional values. The following dissertation examines citizen attitudes toward DEI in public higher education in the context of intensifying right-wing backlash, including legislative efforts to defund DEI programs and restrict institutional practices. Using a series of data of original survey experiments and targeted survey data, the three-article dissertation investigates when and why citizens support or oppose DEI initiatives, how attitudes shift when face with the real-world consequences of defunding DEI, and how Black bureaucrats, the individuals often tasked with carrying out DEI work, perceive the value and burden of such efforts.

Bring Back the Politics to Administration: Citizen Attitudes of DEI in Higher Education

Diversity, equity, and inclusion—three words that have become dog whistles for the modern Republican party. Once viewed as aspirational values aimed at creating fairer and more representative institutions, "DEI" is now frequently portrayed in right-wing rhetoric as a dangerous ideological agenda. Conservative politicians and media figures have redefined DEI as a partisan issue, casting it as a mechanism for indoctrinating children, lowering standards, and diverting taxpayer dollars from more "legitimate" educational priorities. The reframing has led to widespread political movement at the state level, with Republican governors and legislators introducing and passing bills designed to curtail or eliminate DEI initiatives in public higher education.

Legislative efforts often include bans on university diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) offices, prohibitions on mandatory diversity training, and the removal of diversity statement requirements in hiring and admissions processes. Many bills also contain language explicitly targeting the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT), even though CRT is rarely part of undergraduate curricula. Such laws function symbolically as much as practically; they signal a broader rejection of policies that acknowledge systemic inequality or prioritize demographic representation. The rhetoric used by the Republican Party illustrates DEI as a controversial topic that indoctrinates children and wastes valuable resources. State legislators and governors have chosen to pass—or attempt to pass—bills banning Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives within public higher education institutions. The legislation prohibits the existence of any university DEI offices, bans DEI training,

and restricts the use of diversity statements or identity-based preferences in hiring and admissions practices, as well as the inclusion of Critical Race Theory in the curriculum.

The Republican party widely uses the term DEI as a dog whistle– the use of coded or suggestive language in political messaging- to justify the use of racist and prejudiced practices and avoid explicit discriminatory language. The rhetoric challenges the workplace demographic change and promotes the traditional white-cis male power structure that exists in the United States. The Republican party casts DEI initiatives as threats to meritocracy and taps into the fear of cultural displacement. On some level, it appears that the anti-DEI rhetoric appeals to voters– Trump won the 2024 election using and promoting anti-DEI legislation.

The rhetorical strategy is deeply connected to a broader effort to preserve existing power structures. By opposing DEI, Republican politicians are implicitly defending a status quo in which whiteness and maleness are normative and unchallenged. Anti-DEI rhetoric often paints universities as institutes of leftist ideology that are out of touch with "real American values," reinforcing the notion that higher education must be reined in to restore national identity and traditional hierarchies.

Perhaps most strikingly, the anti-DEI stance appears to resonate with a significant portion of the electorate. Former President Donald Trump's successful 2024 presidential campaign leaned heavily into anti-DEI messaging, using it to galvanize support among conservative voters who feel alienated by the cultural and institutional changes of the past two decades. The campaign's embrace of anti-DEI rhetoric exemplified a broader political strategy: to turn cultural resentment into political capital by weaponizing the language of fairness and neutrality against efforts to redress inequality.

The backlash against DEI is not merely a debate over educational policy, it is a calculated political project that weaponizes cultural anxiety, reaffirms racial and gender structures, and mobilizes opposition to social progress under the guise of defending objectivity, merit and fiscal responsibility.

Research objective

The dissertation aims to understand citizen attitudes of diversity, equity, and inclusion policies given the contentious nature of the current policies. The following empirical chapters use the higher education setting and mandatory DEI adoption to analyze when citizens are in favor of DEI policies. The objective is to understand how rhetoric used about DEI and the continuous attack from conservatives impacts attitudes of DEI policies. With the potential of defunding DEI courses, the question becomes how does this impact our universities and students. The potential consequences include things like lack of minority students, faculty and staff feeling safe on campus, pulling of program accreditation, impact on university reputation, and loss of federal student aid. The consequences are rarely discussed. The second empirical chapter intends to analyze when faced with the consequences when citizens shift their attitude. Are their political opinions malleable?

The objective of the final empirical chapter is to learn about Black bureaucrats' opinions on DEI. Black bureaucrats and other bureaucrats of color are almost always expected to engage in DEI work but rarely are they asked their thoughts. In a political climate that does not value equity, the public sector, or underrepresented communities, Black bureaucrats are fighting an uphill battle— that seems never-ending. The marginalized and often "tokenized" Black bureaucrat is expected to take on even more work than their white coworkers. The extra layers of emotional labor places many more burdens on the Black bureaucrats. The third empirical chapter aims to understand how Black

bureaucrats feel about such a polarizing topic, that begs the question does the work even matter. In sum, the research objective is broadly, what are the attitudes toward DEI– this symbolic dog whistle that has become synonymous with hatred and attack on meritocracy.

Methodological Approach

Through using a 3x5 survey experiment, I capture citizen attitudes toward anti-DEI legislation in the higher education space. The 15 vignettes feature fictitious scenarios of a public four-year university implementing a mandatory Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) course as part of its curriculum. The university president justifies the adoption using one of four potential reasons: students requested it, to enable students to be competitive in the labor market, to reflect best practices, or to demonstrate the university's commitment to belonging. Part of the complexity is to implement politician opposition to DEI. To engage this segment, I use two reasons: 1. DEI is beyond the responsibility of the university and 2. DEI is a part of the woke liberal agenda.

The third empirical chapter uses original survey data collected from Black bureaucrats to understand their opinions of DEI in the workplace. The survey was informed by qualitative interviews conducted with Black bureaucrats to engage in real-world applications and experiences. The survey was distributed to people a part of the National Forum of Black Public Administrators and a sample of Black bureaucrats recruited from Prolific.

Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is structured as three independent journal articles. The first empirical article is titled *Bureaucratic Bashing: An Attack on Higher Education.* The chapter utilizes the 3x5 survey

experiment to analyze the effects of bureaucracy bashing, which involves the sustained criticism and undermining of individual bureaucrats, specific agencies, or the bureaucratic system by elected officials, media figures, and other public influencers (Hvidman & Andersen, 2015**;** Hendricks et al., 2024)**.**

Empirical Chapter Two: *Facing the Consequences of Our Actions: Citizen Attitudes Toward the Potential Outcomes of Defunding DEI Programs* analyzes the second wave of the survey experiment, focusing on respondents who support a ban on state-funded diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs. The chapter investigates the question of what respondents are willing to lose if DEI programs lose state funding. The work is grounded in policy feedback literature and the malleability of political opinion. The third empirical chapter is co-authored with Dr. Aarika Forney. The chapter utilizes survey responses to understand the opinions of Black bureaucrats regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

Empirical Chapter 1: Bureaucratic Bashing: An Attack on Higher Education

Morgan Woodle, Ph.D. Candidate

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Introduction

The current political climate is increasingly characterized by politicians engaging in what contemporary public administration scholars have coined "bureaucracy bashing." Scholars define bureaucracy bashing as the sustained criticism and undermining of individual bureaucrats, specific agencies, or the bureaucratic system by elected officials, media figures, and other public influencers (Hvidman & Andersen, 2015**;** Hendricks et al., 2024**).** Bureaucracy bashing serves several political functions. Politicians often use bureaucracy-bashing as an electoral strategy to resonate with voter frustrations over perceived inefficiencies or failures in government services. Politicians who use bureaucracy-bashing also offer a convenient scapegoat for policy shortcomings, allowing them to deflect blame from their own legislative or executive actions. Beyond elections, bureaucracy-bashing can also be employed as a policy strategy, where officials frame the bureaucracy in a negative light to build support for specific reforms or to justify sweeping changes in how public services are administered.

Higher education is a prominent contemporary arena where this bashing tactic is deployed, particularly concerning social equity initiatives such as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs. Politicians have increasingly criticized university bureaucracies in this policy domain for allegedly prioritizing ideological commitments over traditional academic goals, such as excellence, free

inquiry, and financial stewardship**.** DEI efforts are frequently portrayed as ideologically driven, fiscally irresponsible, or incompatible with meritocratic ideals. The rhetoric surrounding DEI is viewed not only as a misallocation of university resources but also as a threat to the core mission of higher education.

However, DEI has historically played a foundational role in expanding access to higher education. University initiatives aim to reduce systemic barriers and create learning environments where students from marginalized communities can thrive. Before the 2022 Supreme Court decision in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard and the University of North Carolina*, race-conscious admissions policies were a central mechanism for achieving equity-based goals. After the Supreme Court ruled such practices unconstitutional, DEI programs became more politically contentious. Critics labeled these practices as ineffective, financially wasteful, and even discriminatory, characterizing them as examples of so-called "reverse racism (Butcher, 2023)**.** The backlash became a rallying point in the broader culture war narrative, where DEI is framed as part of a "woke liberal agenda" that threatens conservative values and traditional notions of meritocracy. The cultural war attack on DEI has important implications for policy and the administrative role of bureaucrats. Public administrators are tasked with implementing policy equitably and impartially, regardless of the level of government or policy area. When DEI initiatives are stripped from institutions, bureaucrats are left without the tools to address systemic inequities, thereby undermining their ability to meet normative expectations of fairness and inclusion in public service. Thus, bureaucracy-bashing in the context of DEI not only affects policy implementation but also challenges the foundational values of the public service profession.

I examine the profound impact of such rhetoric, particularly when it targets the moral reputation of bureaucracies, on citizens' attitudes toward contentious policies. While prior scholarship (Callier, 2018) has demonstrated that politicians can effectively sway public opinion through bureaucracy bashing, there is limited empirical evidence on whether this tactic equally influences public attitudes toward deeply polarizing policy issues, such as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in higher education. The polarized nature of DEI and citizens often holding entrenched views aligned with partisan identity raises critical questions: Can a politician's attack on a bureaucracy's moral standing alter citizen support for or opposition to contentious policies? Does the source of the attack or the nature of the framing affect how citizens respond? The study aims to answer these questions, offering a fresh perspective on the evolving relationship between politics, bureaucracy, and public opinion in an era of increasing ideological polarization.

The study implements a 3x5 survey experiment designed to examine the effects of bureaucracy bashing on public opinion to answer these questions. The experimental design enables the paper to assess how different types of bashing—focusing on competence, morality, or ideological neutrality—interact with partisan cues and policy content to shape respondents' attitudes. This research contributes to a growing body of work on administrative legitimacy, political communication, and citizen trust while offering insights into the evolving relationship between politics, bureaucracy, and public opinion in an era of increasing ideological polarization.

Public Opinion on DEI

A 2023 PEW Research Center report found that 56% of employees believed focusing on DEI at work was a good thing; While only 16% found DEI in the workplace was a “bad thing.” The

following year in another poll, PEW Research Center found that more workers felt that focusing on DEI in the workplace was a "bad thing" and that their company was focusing on DEI "too much" (PEW, 2024). In the matter of one year, workers suddenly shifted their opinion on a topic that provides and promotes equity within the workplace. The Economist and YouGov poll in 2025 found even more negative opinions on DEI programs. Around 45% of respondents were in favor of ending DEI programs in school and government (YouGov, 2025). These findings had strong partisan, gender, and racial differences. The changes in public opinion in each year could be attributed to the presidential election. There was an increase in rhetoric that attacked DEI programs and funding. Politicians used bureaucrat bashing frames and tactics to reiterate that schools are influencing our children and enabling a "woke agenda." The election is a prime example of how influential bureaucrat bashing can be when enacted for political gain.

Literature Review

Citizen Attitudes and Public Administration

The study of citizen attitudes toward government services and bureaucracies began gaining traction in the 1970s, initially to assess performance outcomes for local governments. Over time, it has evolved into a core component of public administration research and practice. Understanding public perception has become essential for elected officials and administrators, as surveys capturing these attitudes serve as key performance indicators, measuring the effectiveness of service delivery, public trust, and legitimacy (Overeem, 2005).

The rise of New Public Management (NPM) significantly advanced the prominence of citizen attitudes in performance measurement. In the 1980s and 1990s, NPM emphasized that public organizations should emulate the efficiency and customer orientation of the private sector (Kaboolian, 1998**;** Dunlevy & Hood, 1994**)**. The emergence of the public sector reflected private sector values, and the Reinventing Government (REGO) movement stressed the importance of meeting citizens' needs and preferences as a central goal of public service **(**Frederickson, 1996**;** Caillier, 2020). One of the key mechanisms for achieving this was adopting citizen attitudes as preferred outcome measures, reflecting a shift from traditional bureaucratic performance metrics to more responsive and citizen-centered governance (Overman, 2017). Citizen-driven performance measures provide critical feedback on public sentiment, enabling governments to adjust their policymaking priorities and service delivery strategies. This approach aligns with the "close to the customer" model of management, in which citizen satisfaction and choice are treated as primary drivers of bureaucratic accountability and responsiveness.

When surveys are well-constructed and ask clear, direct, and specific questions, they can yield detailed feedback that helps officials identify service gaps, improve delivery, and effectively address citizen concerns. Previous research shows a strong correlation between citizen perceptions and those of public service employees (Rosentraub, 1981**;** Van Ryzin, Immerwahr, & Altman, 2008**)**, reinforcing the value of public feedback in evaluating both service quality and internal bureaucratic performance. However, citizen attitudes are not shaped solely by agency performance. External factors also play a significant rol**e (**Van Ryzin, 2004**).** For instance, citizens interacting frequently with government agencies tend to offer more favorable evaluations of government services than those with limited

contact. Increased interaction often leads to greater familiarity and understanding, which, in turn, fosters more positive assessments of bureaucratic performance (Chingos et al., 2012**;** Porumbescu, 2017**)**. These favorable evaluations are consequential, linked to perceptions of service effectiveness, and contribute to the legitimacy of the agencies (Van Ryzin, 2015).

Bureaucratic Framing and Its Influence

Understanding how public opinion is formed requires examining the performance and portrayal of bureaucracies in political and media discourse. Framing plays a critical role in shaping these perceptions. As defined by Entman (1993, p. 52), *"to frame" is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation."* Political science literature emphasizes that framing effects are powerful tools of influence, often propagated through media narratives that highlight the selective aspects of public organizations (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Furthermore, the framing effects literature emphasizes that the public is not rational, that their opinions are context-dependent (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981; Iyengar, 1991). However, that does not mean citizens are not competent. Framing effects are found to be influential on concepts or issues that citizens lack prior knowledge of (Druckman, 2001). Other work on framing effects highlights that framing and cue effects vary over time and depend on the political party endorsing the frame (Slothuus and de Vreese, 2010; Nicholson, 2011; Druckman et al., 2010). When a person receives competing messages simultaneously, they neutralize one another. However, when given them at different times, people tend to place an overwhelming amount of support for the frame received

most recently—highlighting the importance of message sequencing (Chong & Druckman, 2010). The strength of the message and competitiveness of the environment impacts framing effects as well (Druckman et al, 2010).

In public administration, framing is studied to understand how politicians emphasize either the positive or negative aspects of bureaucratic institutions to shape public opinion **(**Goffman, 1986; Callier, 2020; Hendricks et al., 2024**).** Politicians routinely use bureaucratic framing during public appearances and media engagements, portraying the bureaucracy as either an asset or a liability to advance their goals.

A standard frame used is the depiction of bureaucracy as inefficient, bloated, or unaccountable—a narrative that has persisted since the Reagan era and continues to influence public attitudes (Goodsell, 2004**).** These portrayals are reinforced by theoretical frameworks, such as New Public Management, which suggests that the public sector is inherently inefficient compared to the private sector. Similarly, Public Choice Theory posits that bureaucrats are primarily motivated by self-interest, seeking to maximize their budgets rather than serving the public (Niskanen, 1971**).** Even seemingly neutral terms like "public" can evoke negative connotations in the minds of citizens (Hvidman & Andersen, 2015**),** demonstrating the power of language and framing in shaping perceptions.

Two dominant forms of bureaucratic framing are bureaucratic bashing and bureaucratic praising. Historically, research has concentrated on bashing, which gained traction in the 1970s and found heightened utility during the Reagan administration as a political strategy to delegitimize government programs and advocate for smaller government (Goodsell, 2000**).** More recently, scholars

have begun to explore bureaucratic praising—a strategy wherein politicians highlight public servants' competence, dedication, or efficiency to claim credit for successful policies or build trust in specific institutions (Hendricks et al., 2024). Politicians use these frames to achieve various political objectives, including winning elections, promoting policies, claiming credit, or deflecting blame for failures. They can apply these frames at different levels: Macro-level, targeting the entire government or bureaucracy; Meso-level, focusing on specific agencies or categories of civil servants; and Micro-level, spotlighting individual bureaucrats or frontline workers (Hendricks et al., 2024).

The study focuses on meso-level bureaucratic framing, using higher education institutions as the focal point of bureaucratic entities. Through this lens, the paper examines how different framing approaches influence the public's perception of DEI-related policies. Bureaucratic framing shapes the external image and reputation of public institutions by reinforcing certain beliefs and influencing how individuals assess the trustworthiness and legitimacy of bureaucracies. Hendricks et al. (2024) have operationalized these effects along four key dimensions:

1. Impartiality – whether the bureaucracy is seen as fair and unbiased,
2. Motivation – perceived dedication to public service,
3. Trustworthiness – belief in the honesty and reliability of the bureaucracy,
4. Rightness – moral and ethical alignment with public values.

By integrating citizen attitudes and bureaucratic framing, this paper aims to understand how public opinion is formed, manipulated, or influenced through strategic political communication, particularly in polarized policy environments such as higher education and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

TABLE 1

Moral Sub-Dimension	Negative	Positive
(Im)partiality	Biased: Referent is considered partial or politically prejudiced.	Unbiased: Referent is considered impartial or politically neutral.
Motivation	Selfish: Referent neglects the interest of society and may provoke harm to society.	Selfless: Referents put societal interests before their own and do good for society.
Trustworthiness	Untrustworthy: A Referent is considered unreliable or makes dishonorable decisions.	Trustworthy: Referent is considered reliable or as making honorable decisions.
Rightness	Misguided: The referent is believed to have taken the wrong course of action or prioritized tasks or values incorrectly.	Well-guided: A Referent is believed to take the right course of action or to have their priorities straight.

(Hendricks et al., 2024)

Theoretical Framework

To analyze how bureaucratic bashing frames affect public support for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies in higher education, this research paper utilizes citizen attitudes. Since the

Minnowbrook Conference in 1968, public administration has considered social equity one of its foundational pillars. When implementing public policy, social equity calls for bureaucrats to consider fairness and justice. Nevertheless, this commitment to equity has come under threat in recent years, particularly in states led by conservatives, with concerns surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs at public universities. Since 2022, fifteen states have implemented diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) restrictions or bans in higher education. The anti-DEI policies typically prohibit mandatory DEI courses, DEI statements in hiring, DEI offices and staff, and identity-based preferences in admissions or employment. Conservative politicians often frame DEI as a political threat, using it as a coded dog whistle to appeal to racial and ideological anxieties. Through this rhetoric, DEI is depicted not as a tool for correcting systemic inequities but as a form of ideological overreach. Despite the political salience of these debates, little is known about how framing impacts citizen attitudes toward DEI.

Within public administration theory, four dominant paradigms shape our understanding of bureaucratic behavior:

1. Traditional Public Administration (Wilson, 1887) positions politicians as policy experts and bureaucrats as neutral implementers of policy.
2. New Public Administration (Fredrickson, 1980) emphasizes bureaucratic discretion, arguing that values such as morality and social equity should guide the implementation of public policies.

3. New Public Management (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994) shifts toward treating the public sector like the private sector, prioritizing efficiency, competition, and measurable outcomes.
4. New Public Service (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015**)** highlights the importance of citizen engagement, suggesting that bureaucrats serve the public interest by facilitating democratic participation.

These theoretical "waves" serve as the basis for the survey vignettes and the framing used in the experiment. The first hypothesis posits that each paradigm will influence citizen attitudes differently.

H1: *The waves of public administration will statistically significantly affect support for a mandatory DEI course at a university.*

Although public administration literature has long debated how bureaucrats should approach implementation, less attention has been given to how citizens perceive the bureaucracy's role, particularly in contentious policy domains like DEI. This study aims to fill that gap. I incorporate two bureaucratic bashing frames from the public administration literature to examine how political rhetoric influences citizen attitudes: negative impartiality and rightness (Hendricks et al., 2024)**.** These frames reflect the dominant themes in contemporary political discourse about DEI.

The impartiality-bashing frame captures the narrative that universities are biased, prioritizing liberal ideologies and ignoring the interests of conservative, cisgender, and white students. This framing aligns with broader criticisms of DEI, which argue that it promotes partisan agendas rather than genuine inclusivity. On the other hand, the rightness-bashing frame critiques the moral legitimacy of DEI policies. Politicians using this frame argue that universities should focus on

traditional academic objectives, such as discipline-specific education, rather than engage in social or cultural advocacy. According to this view, DEI is a misallocation of institutional priorities and an inappropriate extension of university missions.

These two frames are tested in the survey experiment with the following hypotheses:

H2: Compared to a control condition, t*he rightness-bashing frame or the impartiality-bashing frame will reduce citizen support for a mandatory DEI course.*

H3: *The presence of either the rightness-bashing frame or the impartiality-bashing frame will reduce support for allowing universities the discretion to adopt a DEI course.*

Survey Design

The experiment was fielded for this study in February 2024 and administered through Qualtrics. The survey was listed on Cint Lucid for all U.S. residents who are 18 or older, and 3,945 respondents completed the survey. Coppock and McClellan (2019) validated the use of Lucid for survey experiments by replicating five previously conducted experiments. These authors found that Lucid produces results like those in a larger population more representative of U.S. benchmarks (demographics, political, and psychological profiles). After accounting for survey drop-off and potential bots, the total sample that went through treatment is 3,156. Pretreatment questions collect respondent demographics such as race/ethnicity, gender, party ideology, and political ideology. The survey's respondents were predominantly white, accounting for 2,778 respondents.. Black respondents and Hispanic respondents accounted for the next largest sample with 572 for the former and 523 for

the latter. The sample contained more women than men, 1990 and 1707. There were slightly more Democrats (1273) than Independents (1260), and only 1146 Republican respondents. Respondents identified most with moderate political ideology (1380), while liberals accounted for 1132 respondents and conservatives 1159.

Figure 1: Race and Ethnicity

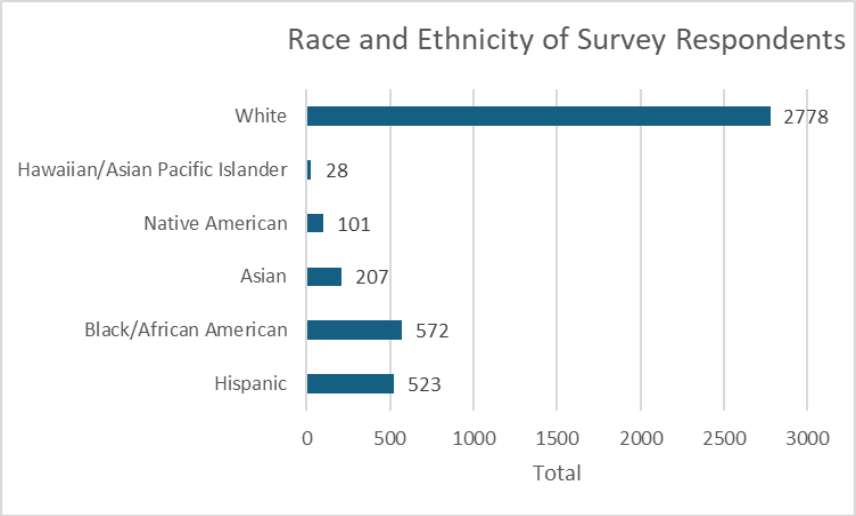


Figure 2: Gender

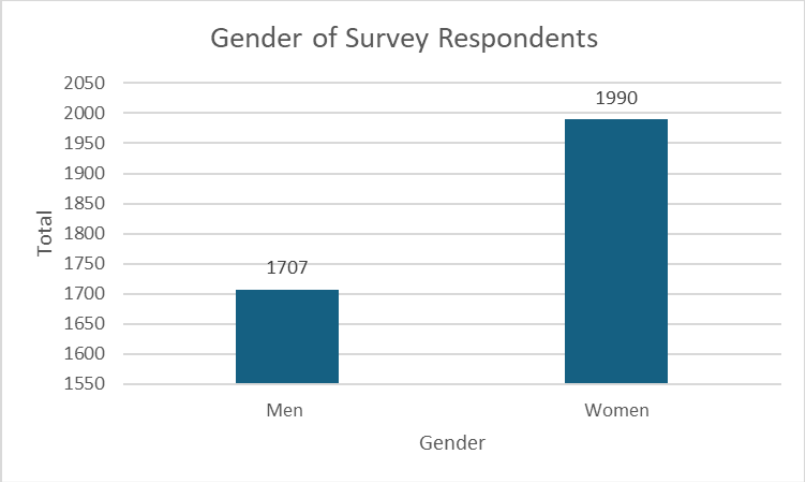


Figure 3: Party Ideology

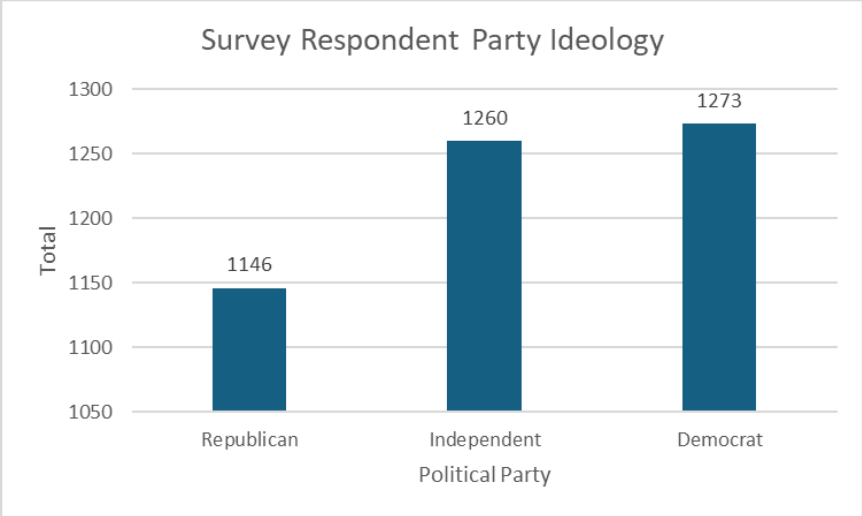
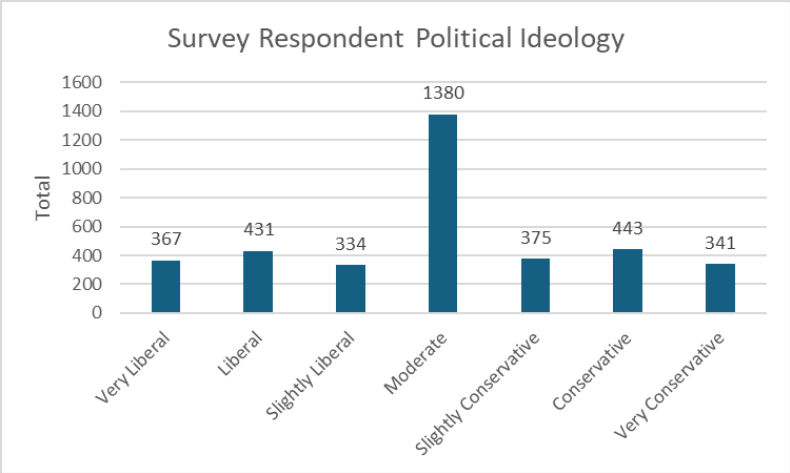


Figure 4: Political Ideology



The survey experiment aims to understand how bureaucratic bashing impacts citizen attitudes toward public organization decision-making. The Republican Party has used DEI to incite hate and division among many Americans, equating DEI with the "woke liberal agenda." The division has led to many state legislatures proposing and passing anti-DEI bills that target public higher education institutions. However, we know little about what people think regarding DEI and the scenarios that justify it in the minds of U.S. citizens. In the 3x5 survey experiment, respondents were assigned to one of fifteen potential treatment groups. The variation was in the justification for the university's adoption of a mandatory DEI course and whether a statement of bureaucratic bashing is present.

The university's justifications follow the waves of public administration (Wilson's Public Administration, New Public Administration, New Public Management, and New Public Service). The expert frame (Wilson's Public Administration) states that the DEI course exemplifies "best practices." For the NPA frame, the university uses a moral claim that adding the DEI course enhances

the sense of belonging among all students. Given the privatization and concerns about the New Public Management labor market, the market frame emphasizes the importance of a DEI course for student success in the post-graduation job market. Citizen engagement is foundational to the New Public Service. Therefore, this frame highlights that the university consulted with students and concluded that the DEI course should be added. The state politicians' opposition stems from statements made by actual politicians: DEI is not part of the university's mission (Rightness), and DEI is part of the woke liberal agenda (Impartiality). A survey experiment is valuable because it isolates the effect, which part of the vignette influences the response. The between-subjects design allows for comparing how different groups respond to various treatments. To provide a more realistic vignette, the universities used in the vignette varied based on the state where the respondents live *(List of universities in the appendix).*

In the post-treatment phase, participants are asked about their relationship with the college to allow for control in the analysis. The post-treatment questions focus on respondents' opinions regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within higher education, specifically in relation to their vignette. Respondents are asked to answer yes (1) or no (0) to the following two post-treatment questions:

1. Do you support adding the mandatory diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) course the university is implementing?
2. Should public universities be free to adopt a DEI course?

Respondents are asked to answer yes (1) or no (0) to these two post-treatment questions, the dependent variables used for analysis. A respondent's "yes " answer to adding a mandatory DEI course is taken to mean that the bashing frame did not work – respondents disregard the statement and still

side with the university. Similarly, a "yes " response to the second question would indicate that the frame did not influence the respondent. A “no” response to either question could reveal a pre-existing bias—they were already opposed to DEI. However, I suggest that the bashing reinforced their belief, resulting in the bureaucratic framework being effective.

Findings

TABLE 2: Descriptive

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Moral	**3925**	**.186**	**.389**	**0**	**1**
Market	**3925**	**.186**	**.389**	**0**	**1**
Expert	**3925**	**.185**	**.389**	**0**	**1**
Citizen-Based	**3925**	**.186**	**.389**	**0**	**1**
Rightness	**3925**	**.31**	**.462**	**0**	**1**
Impartiality	**3925**	**.309**	**.462**	**0**	**1**
Support Mandatory DEI	**3156**	**.616**	**.486**	**0**	**1**
Support Freedom to Adopt	**3124**	**.784**	**.412**	**0**	**1**

Building on prior scholarship, I examine how bureaucratic bashing influences citizens' attitudes toward public policies, particularly in contentious areas such as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in higher education. Specifically, I explore whether negative framing of bureaucratic

actors—namely, universities—affects public support for mandatory DEI courses and institutional discretion in adopting DEI programs. The research contributes to a growing body of work showing that citizen attitudes are highly responsive to elite rhetoric, especially when that rhetoric undermines the perceived legitimacy or neutrality of the bureaucracy.

Figure 5: Citizen Support for Mandatory DEI: Control vs. Rightness Frame

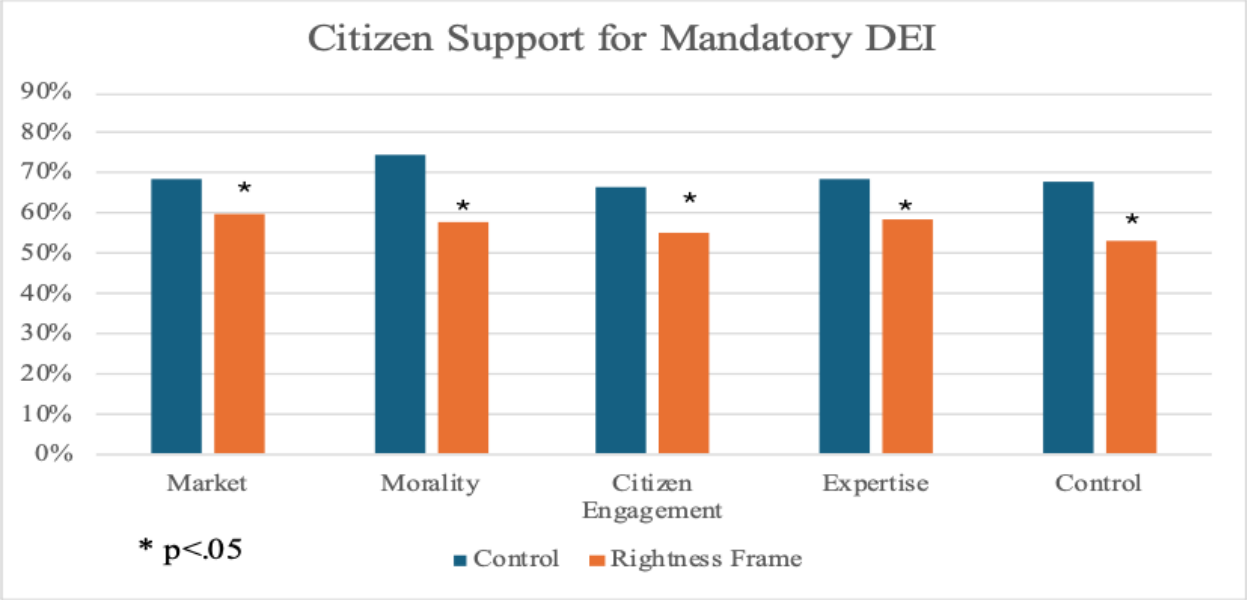


Figure 6: Citizen Support for Mandatory DEI: Control vs. Impartiality Frame

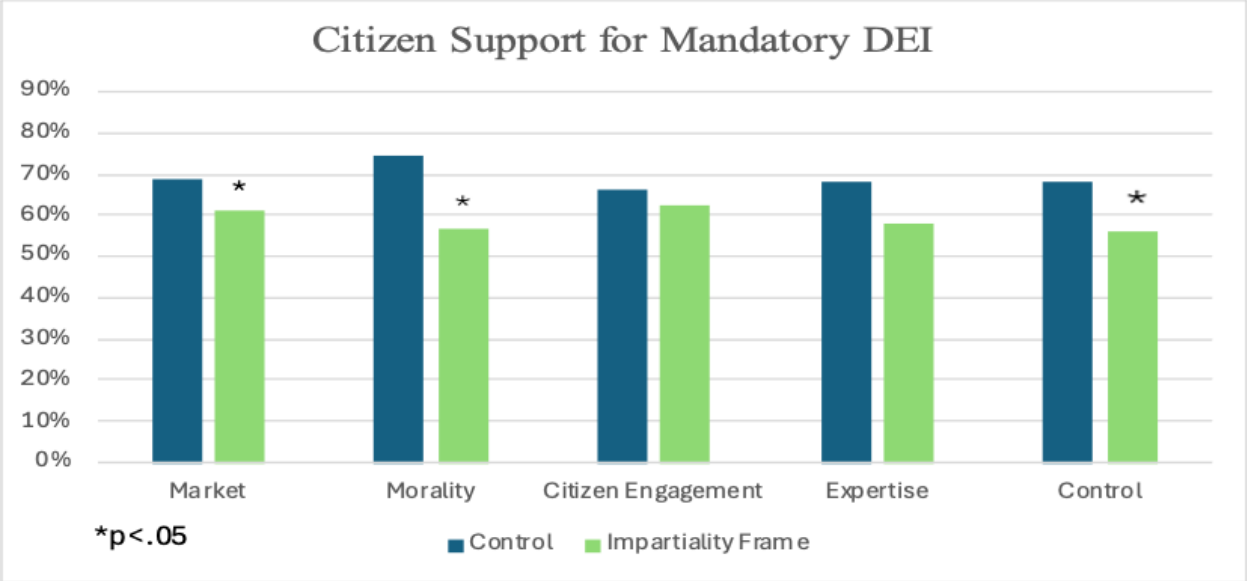


Figure 7: Citizen Support for the Freedom to Adopt DEI: Control vs. Rightness Frame

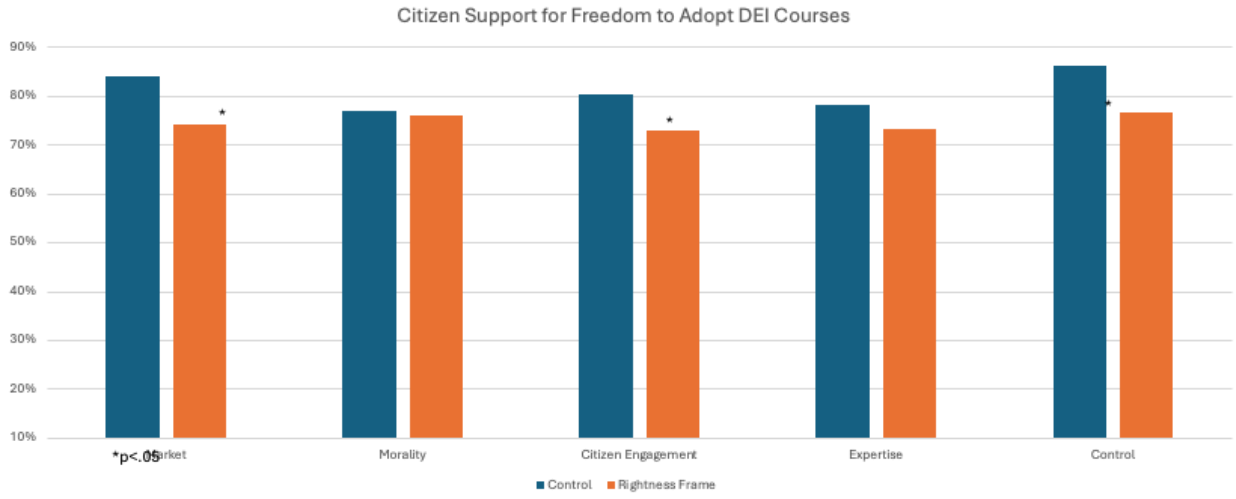
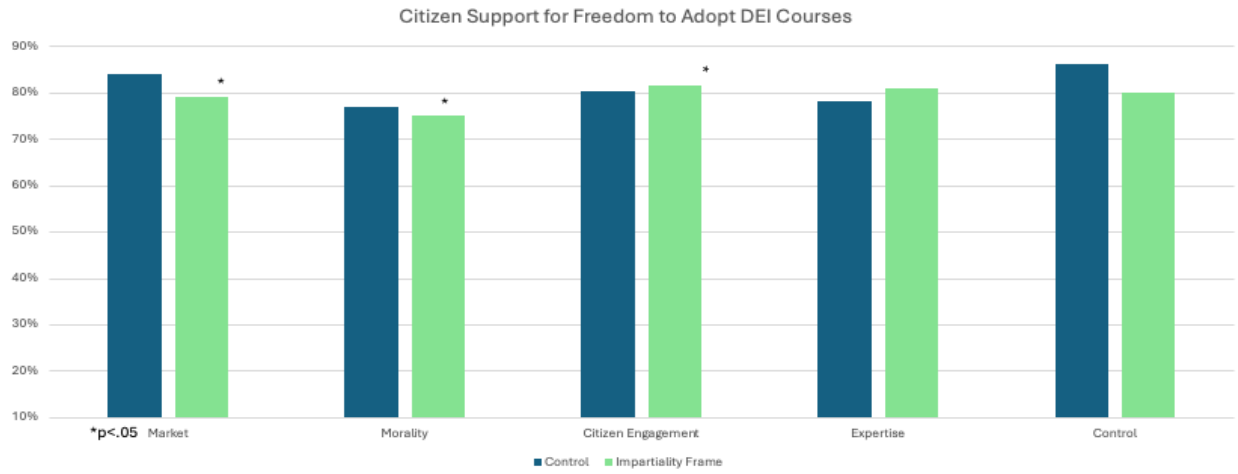


Figure 8: Citizen Support for the Freedom to Adopt DEI: Control vs. Impartiality Frame



To investigate this, I implemented a 3x5 survey experiment, testing combinations of university justifications for DEI (market efficiency, morality, and citizen engagement) and two types of bureaucratic bashing frames: the *rightness* frame (suggesting the policy is an inappropriate or misplaced priority) and the *impartiality* frame (suggesting the university is ideologically biased).

The first model (figure 5) tests the impact of bureaucratic bashing and university justification on respondent support for making a DEI course mandatory. The results indicate that bureaucratic bashing significantly reduces support for the policy. Respondents exposed to the rightness-bashing frame were consistently less supportive of the compulsory DEI course than those in the control group (which received no bashing frame), regardless of the justification offered by the university. Similarly, those exposed to the impartiality frame were less supportive of the course in all cases, except when the justification was grounded in citizen engagement. This exception suggests that a justification

emphasizing responsiveness to public input can, to some extent, buffer the adverse effects of bureaucratic bashing.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the first hypothesis is rejectable**:** that university justification alone would significantly influence support for the DEI course. In contrast, the primary driver of attitude change was the presence of bureaucratic bashing, which undermined support across nearly all experimental conditions. This suggests that negative frames targeting the moral legitimacy or neutrality of the bureaucracy are practical tools in shaping public opinion, even on policies related to equity and inclusion.

The second model (figure 6) examines support for university discretion in adopting DEI programs—whether citizens believe universities should be free to implement DEI initiatives, even if they are not mandated. The results show a more nuanced pattern. The rightness-bashing frame again decreased support for university discretion across several justifications, including market-based, citizen engagement, and control conditions. Similarly, the impartiality-bashing frame reduced support for university discretion in the market and morality justification groups. However, a notable divergence emerged: support for university discretion increased when the impartiality frame was paired with the justification of citizen engagement.

The contrast between attitudes toward mandatory action and institutional discretion reveals an important insight. While respondents may oppose direct DEI mandates—especially when framed as ideologically biased or misguided—they are more willing to support the principle of autonomy for

public institutions. The rise in support for discretion under the citizen engagement condition suggests that citizens value responsiveness and institutional flexibility, even when skeptical of specific policy outcomes. In other words, people may disagree with the policy, but still believe universities should have the right to respond to stakeholder needs.

These findings indicate several key implications. First, they show that politicians can efficiently manipulate citizen attitudes toward public institutions and policies through rhetorical frames, particularly those that undermine bureaucratic neutrality or moral legitimacy. Second, the divergence between support for action and discretion highlights a tension in public expectations: citizens want bureaucracies to be both accountable and apolitical, yet also responsive and adaptable. This tension complicates the role of bureaucrats tasked with implementing equity-focused policies in a polarized environment.

A limitation of this study is its focus on only two bashing frames—rightness and impartiality. Future research should investigate other types of negative framing, such as those emphasizing inefficiency, elitism, or waste, and explore how these interact with various policy domains and institutional contexts. Nonetheless, this study shows that bureaucratic framing—particularly negative, politicized rhetoric about public institutions—can significantly erode support for even modest social equity efforts.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that bureaucratic bashing frames significantly influence citizen attitudes toward adopting DEI policies in higher education, underscoring the power of elite rhetoric in shaping public opinion. Among the frames tested, the rightness-bashing frame, which asserts that DEI

policies fall outside the legitimate mission of universities, had the strongest and most consistent impact in decreasing support for mandatory DEI coursework. While the impartiality frame, which positions DEI as part of a "woke liberal agenda," also reduced support, its effect was more context-dependent and less pronounced overall. It is possible that citizens were predisposed to similar frames, which may have impacted their preferences. The cues in turn failed to change respondents' opinions (Druckman & Leeper, 2012). Betchel et al (2015) find that framing effects are less effective in contentious policies because citizens hold stable preexisting opinions that remain consistent even when challenged with alternative political messages.

These findings contribute to a broader understanding of how politicians and other elites can erode public trust and support for equity-focused initiatives by targeting the moral or institutional legitimacy of the bureaucracy. They also highlight a critical tension: even as citizens may reject specific equity policies, they may still support institutional autonomy, particularly when bureaucratic actions are framed as responsive to stakeholder needs.

Future research should continue to investigate the broader landscape of bureaucratic framing effects– including the expansion beyond rightness and impartiality to incorporate the full range of negative frames—motivation (suggesting self-serving intentions) and trustworthiness (questioning the honesty or reliability of the institution)—as theorized by Hendricks et al.,(2024). Additionally, a growing need exists to explore bureaucratic praising frames, highlighting bureaucratic actors' competence, fairness, and public value. Incorporating positive and negative framing allows a more comprehensive understanding of how public perceptions of the bureaucracy are constructed and contested. Ultimately, this research reinforces the importance of studying citizen attitudes as a core

outcome in public administration and demonstrates that framing matters—not just for political communication, but for the legitimacy and capacity of the public sector.

Empirical Chapter 2: Facing the Consequences of Our Actions: Citizen Attitudes Toward the Potential Outcomes of Defunding DEI Programs

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Efforts to undermine diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have escalated since the first Trump presidency, framing DEI initiatives as antithetical to American ideals of meritocracy and individual achievement. The rhetorical and policy-driven backlash situates DEI at the center of a broader cultural conflict that pits "hard work" and "colorblind" principles against efforts to foster inclusive environments that acknowledge systemic barriers. Under the Biden administration, the assault on DEI continued at the state level: as of early 2025, at least 134 anti-DEI bills had been introduced across 29 states (Chronicle Staff, 2025). Of these, 21 were ultimately approved by the legislature, with 19 subsequently signed into law. While many have failed or been tabled, the legislative trend signals a sustained and coordinated effort to dismantle institutional mechanisms that support inclusion. Standard provisions in the proposed legislation include eliminating DEI offices and staff, banning mandatory DEI training, prohibiting identity-conscious admissions or hiring practices, and restricting the requirement of diversity statements. Although the details vary across states, the overarching goal is clear: to curtail the visible and institutional presence of DEI in public education and government.

Opponents of DEI often accuse colleges and universities of indoctrinating students with radical or leftist ideologies. The framing reduces complex, empirically supported equity efforts into partisan caricature. It obscures the practical functions of DEI offices, such as increasing student retention, improving campus climate, and supporting historically marginalized populations. The backlash has moved beyond symbolic protest into tangible policy changes that risk undermining educational quality and equity.

The ramifications of these bans are significant. The loss of DEI infrastructure can hurt the campus climate at the institutional level, particularly for students and faculty from underrepresented groups. Institution's risk losing federal Title IV funding if they fail to meet nondiscrimination standards, which would restrict access to Pell grants and federal loans. Accreditation bodies may also penalize programs, such as those in professional fields like law, medicine, and business, that fail to demonstrate compliance with diversity-related standards. Furthermore, DEI can damage an institution's reputation, reduce competitiveness, and deter donors, faculty, and prospective students.

The material consequences highlight the stakes of the debate, yet opposition to DEI bans is not always rooted in rational calculations, such as outcomes. Instead, public attitudes often reflect symbolic commitments and cultural identity, suggesting that belief systems, rather than institutional effectiveness, frequently drive support or opposition to policies. The findings also indicate that many respondents hold malleable beliefs that can shift when information about the real-world impacts of DEI bans is provided. Thus, this opens the significant possibility for dialogue, education, and policy design that surpasses defending and attacking DEI initiatives along partisan lines. The study examines

both the symbolic and practical dimensions of DEI opposition, aiming to understand the challenges and opportunities faced by DEI advocates.

Literature Review

The recent wave of state-level bans on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs in public universities and government institutions has sparked intense political debate and mobilization. Supporters of the bans often frame them as necessary corrective actions against ideological overreach or as necessary protections against perceived politicization of public institutions. In contrast, critics argue that the prohibitions represent a broader reactionary movement aimed at dismantling institutional commitments to promote equity and inclusion. The political and legal efforts have unfolded amidst growing public discourse regarding the role of DEI in higher education, reflecting deeper cultural tensions over race, fairness, identity, and the role of public institutions in promoting social justice.

The controversy over Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in higher education raises important questions for the fields of public administration and political science regarding the formation and malleability of public opinion, particularly in polarized contexts where elite rhetoric, symbolic predispositions, and institutional design interact to shape mass public opinion. Two key bodies of literature on opinion formation and policy feedback provide theoretical frameworks for understanding public reactions to the current political climate.

Public Opinion Malleability

A foundational concern in political science is the balance between the stability and flexibility of public opinion. Zaller's (1992) Receive-Accept-Sample model posits that individuals form views based on the interaction between their predispositions and elite messaging. Rather than holding stable attitudes, citizens often respond to the most salient and recently received information, particularly when it comes from trusted elites, further highlighting the importance of exposure and cognitive engagement. The perspective highlights how citizens often lack deeply held opinions and instead respond to the most salient information available, particularly when framed by trusted elites. In the case of DEI, the proliferation of partisan messaging has made these issues especially susceptible to elite framing. Prominent politicians have accused universities of using DEI to "toxically indoctrinate students" (U.S. Dept of Ed, "Dear Colleague," 2025), a message that resonates with preexisting ideological suspicions about higher education. Empirical evidence supports the power of such framing. Pew Research (2024) found that nearly half of U.S. workers support eliminating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in the workplace, while a YouGov (2025) survey reported that 45% of Americans favor ending all government and school DEI programs. These findings suggest that the public is responsive to the rhetorical cues surrounding DEI, especially when these cues align with ideological predispositions.

Scholars such as Lenz (2012) emphasize that the opinion change is most likely to occur when new information comes from credible sources that align with an individual's core values. In the context of DEI, this is highly relevant given the stark partisan divide. Endorsements from influential conservative figures may reinforce opposition to DEI, despite evidence indicating potential harm from such bans. Research in political psychology further suggests that individuals often engage in *motivated*

reasoning, a process where people selectively accept information that reinforces their prior beliefs and discount contradictory evidence (Taber & Lodge, 2006**;** Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Citizens are more likely to accept information that reinforces their existing beliefs and dismiss facts that contradict them. Therefore, even if DEI bans result in measurable institutional harms, such as declines in student support or faculty diversity, these outcomes may not alter opinion unless they are perceived through a trusted ideological lens.

Moreover, scholars have long emphasized that political attitudes are not merely the product of rational cost-benefit calculations. Instead, symbolic predispositions — particularly attitudes toward race, fairness, and group identity — can powerfully shape political preferences. Citrin and Sears (2014) argue that symbolic attitudes, such as racial attitudes and values tied to individualism, often predict political behavior more than material self-interest. Similarly, Sniderman (2000) contends that core values, such as moral traditionalism or egalitarianism, serve as cognitive anchors in shaping public opinion. In the case of DEI, opposition often reflects deep-seated beliefs about meritocracy, fairness, and perceived group hierarchies. Consequently, public interpretations of DEI-related policies and their consequences are filtered through these symbolic frameworks, rather than judged solely on their institutional or practical merits.

Policy Feedback and Public Opinion

Whereas the opinion malleability literature focuses on top-down influences, policy feedback theory examines how policies themselves reshape public preferences over time. In Schattschneider's (1935) seminal work, he claims, "new policies create new politics." The statement serves as the foundation for policy feedback. Pierson (1993) suggests that feedback occurs through two

mechanisms: resource effects (changing the incentives and capacities of actors) and interpretive effects (changing how individuals perceive the political world). In the context of DEI, elite cues and symbolic predispositions shape how people respond to DEI rhetoric; public opinion is also influenced by policy. Pierson (1993) argues that policies are not just outputs of political processes; they also reshape political dynamics by altering incentives, redistributing resources, and redefining the boundaries of political possibility. Mettler and Soss (2004) further explain that public policies help construct citizen identities and affect how individuals perceive their relationship with the government. DEI policies and efforts to dismantle them may influence how respondents understand their opportunities and social standing.

Campbell (2012) extends this logic by emphasizing that beneficiaries of public programs are often motivated to defend programs when they are threatened. When applied to the context of DEI policies, individuals who either directly benefit from or strongly identify with the goals of DEI efforts may react negatively when such programs are defunded or banned. Suppose bans on DEI lead to the loss of valued resources such as federal Title IV funding or professional accreditation. In that case, those personally or professionally affected may revise their view regarding new costs. Information about policy consequences can moderate the support for anti-DEI legislation, especially among individuals whose prior attitudes are less ideologically rigid.

Loss aversion theory further enriches this discussion. As Kahneman & Tversky (1979) demonstrate, individuals are generally more sensitive to potential losses than to equivalent gains. Thus providing powerful implications for political communication around DEI. Messages that highlight what will be lost, such as student support programs, accreditation, or faculty retention, may be more

effective in swaying public opinion than abstract appeals to justice or inclusion. As public exposure to the consequences of DEI bans increases, primarily through media or personal experience, some members of the public may begin to revise their views on the issue. However, only if this information is filtered through a lens they find credible.

Survey Design

The experiment was fielded for this study in February 2024 and administered through Qualtrics. Recruitment took place through Cint Lucid, an online panel aggregator with eligibility limited to U.S. residents aged 18 or older. A total of 3,945 respondents completed the survey. Coppock and McClellan (2019) validated that Lucid is a reliable platform for fielding survey experiments; their study replicated five previously conducted experiments and demonstrated that Lucid samples produce results closely aligned with nationally representative benchmarks in demographics, political, and psychological characteristics. After excluding incomplete responses and filtering out potential bot activity, the final analytic sample consisted of 3,156 respondents exposed to the experimental treatment. Before treatment, the survey collected standard pretreatment measures, including demographic characteristics, party affiliation, political ideology, and rural or urban residency.

Respondents were presented with the following screening question to determine eligibility for subsequent questions: "Do you support a ban on using state funds to support diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) at public universities?" The question served as a branching mechanism. Only those who supported banning state funding for DEI initiatives were shown the remainder of the survey.

Those who opposed the ban were immediately routed to the end of the study. Of the 3,156 respondents in the sample, approximately 1,318 (roughly 42%) expressed support for prohibiting state funds for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts at public institutions.

The 1,318 respondents were presented with statements outlining the potential negative consequences of a ban on funding for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Respondents were asked whether they would continue to support the policy in light of this information. The statements were as follows:

1. Banning DEI could result in the loss of many underrepresented minority faculty and students due to feeling unsafe or unwelcome at the institution.
2. Banning DEI could result in losing Title IV eligibility, which would eliminate student access to Pell Grants, subsidized loans, and other federal funding.
3. Banning DEI could violate university program accreditation requirements. The ban would impact the ability to have accredited law school programs, medical programs, or business schools. Once students graduate, they could face difficulty in finding a job.
4. Banning DEI could cause universities to lose their reputation and prestige. The ban could result in fewer university students, lower ranking, and loss of potential donor funding.

Following these potential consequences, respondents were prompted with the options: strongly support the ban, somewhat support the ban, somewhat oppose the ban, or strongly oppose the ban.

Variables of Interest

The study uses the four potential consequence questions as the dependent variables. Overall, the study is interested in variations in public opinion regarding the consequences of defunding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs at public universities. In the analysis, the dependent variable was recoded to indicate respondents who selected “do not support the ban” for all four questions regarding the potential consequences, those whose opinion moved (1, 2, or 3 times), and then those who consistently chose they support the ban. The demographic variables collected at the beginning of the survey served as the independent variables to examine variation in opinion. The demographic variables of interest are gender, partisanship, ideology, and the intersections of these identities.

The logit analysis includes the previously mentioned variables, including trust in government, science, public higher education, and experts. The trust questions were asked individually on a 1-5 Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly Distrust" to "Strongly Trust." The respondents' race, education level, and income level were also considered for the logit analysis.

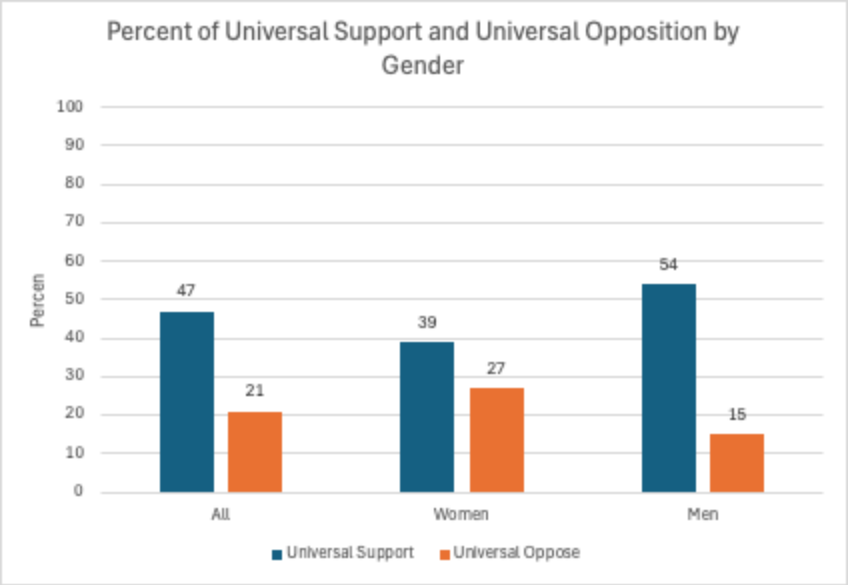
Findings

Symbolic Commitment to DEI Bans

Survey results reveal that opposition to public universities’ diversity, equity, and inclusion policies is widespread and strongly tied to values and identity. Roughly half of all respondents supported a ban on state-funded DEI programming, even after being presented with potential negative consequences. The finding indicates that opposition is driven less by practical evaluation and more by ideological conviction for many. The analysis below focuses on respondents who consistently held the same view across four separate scenarios, each representing a potential consequence of a ban on

diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). These "immovable" respondents consistently supported or opposed the ban, regardless of whether it benefited or harmed students or institutions. Notably, just 21% of respondents fell into the group that consistently opposed the ban, while nearly half (47%) expressed unwavering support for it (figure 9).

Figure 9: Universal Support and Universal Opposition by Gender



Gender differences were evident: men were more likely than women to express consistent support for the ban, with 54% of men and 39% of women falling into the "immovable support" category (figure 9). Political affiliation was an even stronger predictor (figure 10). Most Republicans (57%) supported the ban across all scenarios, regardless of consequence. While support among Democrats (35%) and Independents (42%) was notable, a significant share of respondents across party lines endorsed the ban without exception, challenging the assumption that opposition to DEI is confined to the political right.

Figure 10: Universal Support and Universal Opposition by Partisanship

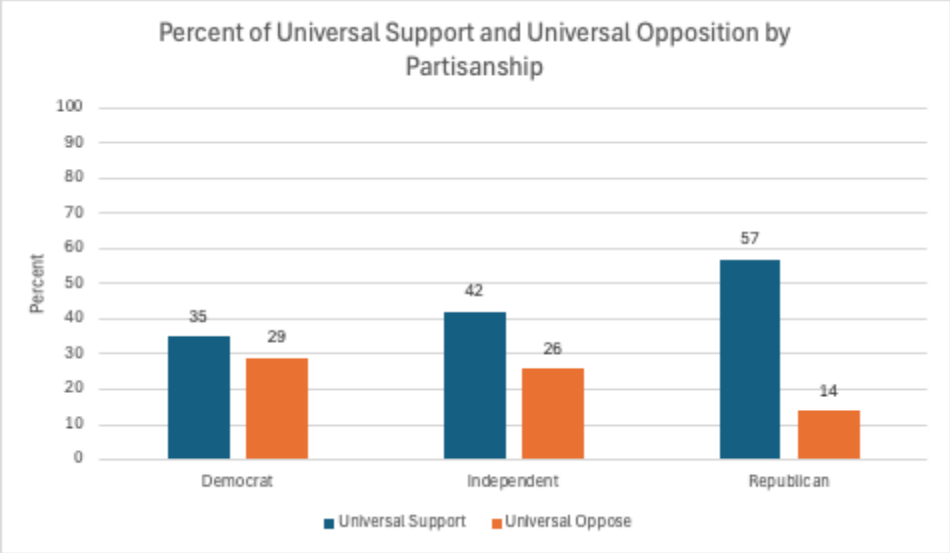
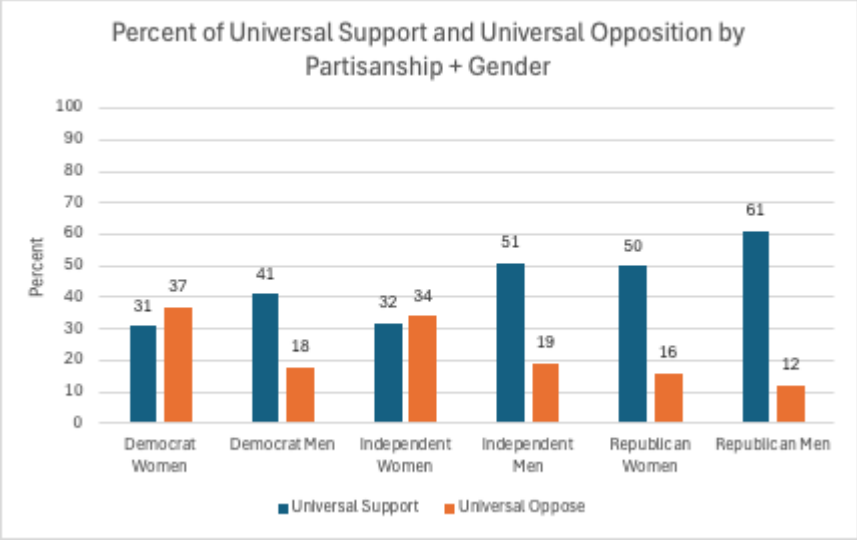


Figure 11: Universal Support and Universal Opposition by Partisanship + Gender



Examining the intersection of gender and partisanship further clarifies the dynamics (figure 11). Among Republican men, support was robust, with 61% expressing unyielding approval for the ban. The group showed the least sensitivity to potential harms to students or institutions. Across Democrats and Independents, gender also influenced responses: women in both groups were more likely than men to oppose the ban consistently. For example, 37% of Democratic women consistently opposed the ban, compared to 31% who supported it (figure 11). Among Independent women, the divide was similar (34% oppose vs. 32% support).

Ideology also strongly shaped attitudes– 60% of conservatives supported the ban in all scenarios, while only 14% opposed it outright (figure 12). Moderates and liberals were more evenly split: 34% of moderates and 37% of liberals expressed consistent support, while 28% and 26%, respectively, consistently opposed the ban. Conservative men stood out as the most unwavering group, with 68% supporting the ban in all cases, and only 10% expressing consistent opposition (figure 13). Interestingly, among liberals, men and women showed similar rates of consistent support, outpacing consistent opposition (figure 13). These findings complicate the narrative that DEI opposition is solely a conservative Republican phenomenon. Instead, skepticism of DEI appears more widespread, cutting across ideological and partisan lines.

Figure 12: Universal Support and Universal Opposition by Ideology

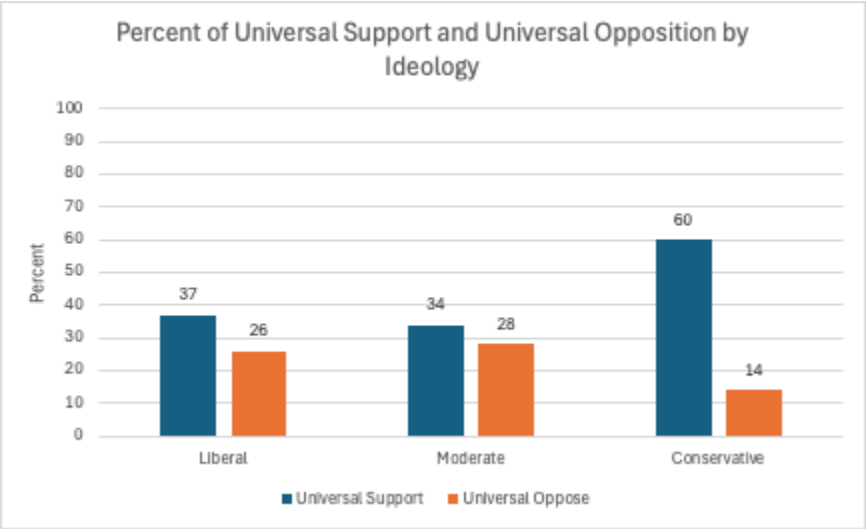
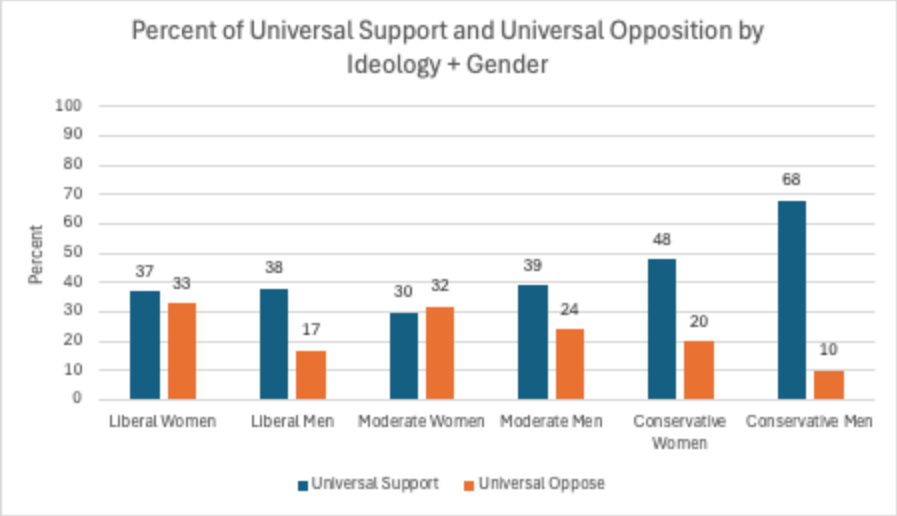


Figure 13: Universal Support and Universal Opposition by Ideology + Gender



Logit Regression Models

Given all four potential scenarios, the dependent variable measures whether a respondent supported the ban on DEI. The variable is measured as 1, indicating that they were "immovable" and continually selected to ban DEI funding, and 0, where the respondent's opinion varied. The logistic regression model estimates the factors that influence an unwavering opinion.

Model one analyzes basic demographics of gender and race. Being a man is associated with higher odds of an immovable position on the state-funded ban at 59.6% ($p<.001$). Similarly, a white respondent also increases support to 70.7% ($p < .001$). Therefore, both gender and race are substantial predictors.

Model two adds partisanship, resulting in a finding that Republicans are 53.1% more likely to maintain unwavering opinions, statistically significant at the .001 level. Identifying as a Democrat is not statistically significant; however, gender and race remain strong indicators of positive support.

In model three, ideology is added, resulting in each one-unit increase in conservatism being associated with higher odds of supporting the ban, statistically significant at the .001 level. Identifying as a Republican remains statistically significant, but its share shrinks to 31.3%. The effect of Republican partisanship partially overlaps with ideological conservatism.

Model four includes all previous predictors, as well as respondents' trust in government, science, experts, and higher education. Trust in higher education is strongly and negatively correlated with a fixed opinion of state-funded DEI (beta = -0.341, $p < .001$). A respondent's trust in science is also negatively associated with support for the ban ($\beta = -0.138$, $p = 0.34$). People with less trust in science and higher education tend to support a universal ban, regardless of their ideological stance.

The final model includes education and income. Education has a marginally significant effect (beta = 0.087, p = .064); more education may slightly increase support for the ban on state-funded DEI. Income is not a significant predictor.

Discussion

The findings point to several critical insights into the current opposition landscape to DEI policies. First opposition is not about tangible impacts or practical considerations; it is deeply intertwined with symbolic politics and value systems. The symbolic dimension helps explain why even individuals unaffected by DEI programs express strong opposition, and informing people of the potential consequences does not alter their attitudes.

Political identity, especially partisanship, shapes opposition in complex ways. While Republicans show the highest level of opposition, a significant minority of Democrats also support DEI bans, and ideological differences between Democrats and Independents are minimal. The pattern highlights the importance of avoiding binary assumptions such as "Republicans oppose DEI, Democrats support DEI." Resistance to DEI initiatives spans various political groups, although the intensity of resistance varies. Gender emerged as an essential but underexplored dimension of DEI opposition. Women's lower immovability rates suggest that gendered experiences and socialization may shape openness to DEI-related arguments. Targeted engagement strategies that recognize these gender differences may prove more effective in shifting attitudes.

Most importantly, the data offers a hopeful pathway for advocates: belief malleability. A substantial proportion of respondents, including some conservatives, are open to persuasion when

presented with information about the consequences. Messaging strategies focused on values, practical benefits, and civil discourse could reduce opposition and foster broader support for DEI policies. An effective plan should focus less on changing the views of the immovable and more on reaching those with flexible positions.

In sum, the opposition to DEI at public universities is complex, value-laden, and only partially explained by political ideology or demographic background. Nuanced, emphatic engagement—not adversarial confrontation—offers the best chance to expand the support for DEI initiatives in a divisive political landscape.

Practitioner Implications

The analysis of DEI opposition among public university stakeholders presents several important implications for policy design and practical engagement strategies. The following points summarize key considerations for practitioners.

Tailored Communication Strategies

The discovery that opposition is often symbolic and value-driven, rather than solely based on practical concerns, indicates that communication must extend beyond presenting empirical outcomes or data on DEI effectiveness. Policy-makers and practitioners should develop messages that connect with the underlying values of diverse audiences, using narratives and examples that resonate with the personal and communal ideals of target group populations. Emphasizing shared values and relatable outcomes could help bridge the gap between symbolic and practical perspectives.

Engagement Through Consequence Awareness

Significant evidence suggests that malleable beliefs can be influenced by informed discussions about the tangible consequences of DEI bans, leading to shifts in attitudes. Strategies highlighting the potential negative impact on campus climate, educational quality, and community inclusiveness may be effective. Policy efforts should include public forums, workshops, or informational campaigns that clearly and empathetically articulate these consequences. Initiatives like this can move those with moderate or flexible views towards a more nuanced understanding and potential support for DEI policies.

Inclusive and Diverse Stakeholder Outreach

Given the varied responses across political affiliations and the notable support of DEI bans even among traditionally aligned groups, a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be effective. Engagement efforts should consider cross-partisan dialogues that focus on common ground. Practitioners can facilitate moderated discussions that invite perspectives from multiple political affiliations and work toward identifying benefits and mutual concerns related to DEI initiatives.

Addressing Gender-Specific Dynamics

Given the evidence that fewer women are in the "immovable" category of DEI opposition compared to men, policies and outreach programs could benefit from incorporating gender-sensitive approaches. The approach could utilize tailored messaging that acknowledges and leverages these differences, fostering more inclusive conversations around DEI.

Strategic Focus on Malleable Beliefs

Recognizing that a significant subset of respondents holds beliefs open to change, resources and efforts should be directed toward this malleable audience. Instead of expending disproportionate effort on those firmly opposed, policies can be more impactful by designing interventions aimed at this receptive group. This may include developing pilot programs, community engagement initiatives, and educational outreach demonstrating the tangible benefits of DEI policies, thereby gradually shifting public opinion.

Logistic regression

Universal Support Ban	Coef.	St.Err.	t-value	p-value	[95% Conf	Interval]	Sig
Man	.515	.119	4.32	0	.282	.749	***
White	.454	.151	3.00	.003	.157	.751	***
Republican	.379	.148	2.55	.011	.088	.67	**
Democrat	.268	.174	1.54	.125	-.074	.609	
Ideology	.107	.046	2.30	.021	.016	.198	**
Trust in Gov	.008	.062	0.13	.898	-.113	.129	
Trust in Science	-.139	.066	-2.13	.034	-.268	-.011	**
Trust in Experts	.012	.077	0.16	.875	-.138	.162	
Trust in Public Higher Ed	-.341	.07	-4.91	0	-.477	-.205	***
Constant	-.036	.336	-0.11	.916	-.693	.622	

Mean dependent var	0.467	SD dependent var	0.499
Pseudo r-squared	0.092	Number of obs	1308
Chi-square	165.507	Prob > chi2	0.000
Akaike crit. (AIC)	1662.108	Bayesian crit. (BIC)	1713.870

$^{***}p<.01$, $^{**}p<.05$, $^{*}p<.1$

What Have You Done for Me Lately?: Black Bureaucrats and Perceptions of DEI Initiatives in Public Organizations.

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Introduction

Public administration research identifies diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as foundational to the effective functioning of bureaucracies. Historically, scholarship on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in public service has focused on the impacts of Affirmative Action (AA), Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO), and Representative Bureaucracy (Sabharwal et al., 2016; Pitts, 2006). These efforts were grounded in the belief that a diverse and representative bureaucracy would better uphold democratic values and serve the public interest (Rourke, 1978). Over time, public organizations have expanded beyond compliance-driven frameworks to implement more proactive and strategic diversity initiatives within human resource management. This evolution is captured in the public administration literature under the concept of diversity management.

In practice, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives have been recognized as essential to effective governance (OLMS, 2023). These initiatives, which aim to foster an inclusive environment, promote equity, and ensure that the diverse needs of all community members are addressed, are significantly shaped and implemented by minority bureaucrats (Berry-James et al., 2023; Blessett, 2023). Black bureaucrats have been vital in efforts to combat systemic racism and promote equity and social justice in public organizations (McCandless and Blessett, 2021). Their crucial role in this process emphasizes their importance and influence in the realm of DEI initiatives. The

effectiveness of DEI initiatives in public organizations can be significantly influenced by the perceptions of those who implement the initiatives. For DEI initiatives to succeed, Black bureaucrats must perceive them as genuine efforts to bring diversity to the organization, ensuring that minority bureaucrats have equal growth opportunities and that clients who share their identity receive adequate services. When Black bureaucrats trust that DEI initiatives are authentic, they are more likely to engage actively and support these efforts, thereby fostering a more inclusive and effective workplace. Nevertheless, understanding the diverse perspectives within the Black community is crucial to tailoring these initiatives effectively. The diversity within the Black community extends beyond simple demographic differences, encompassing a wide array of cultural, political, and socioeconomic backgrounds that shape their views on representation and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives.

Despite the positive intentions behind DEI initiatives, Black bureaucrats often encounter challenges that can lead to skepticism. These challenges include dealing with colleagues who are not invested in the initiatives and being the only one to push for outcomes, which can lead to tokenism. If the organization is performative, it may lack actual support to improve outcomes for the Black community (Beeman, 2021). When DEI initiatives are perceived as superficial or performative, Black bureaucrats may not believe DEI efforts make real change. DEI initiatives operationalize diversity management principles by implementing targeted strategies and programs that promote representation, equity, and inclusion within organizational structures.

Diversity management has been defined in various ways. Thomas (1990, p. 112) describes it as "the process of creating and maintaining an environment that naturally enables all participants to contribute to their full potential in focused pursuit of organizational objectives." Unlike AA and EEO, which are rooted in legal mandates, diversity management emphasizes the everyday practices of managers and the strategic programs organizations adopt to support and retain a diverse workforce. Gilbert and Ivancevich (2000) define it as a systematic organizational commitment to recruiting, retaining, and rewarding a heterogeneous employee base. Pitts (2006) further conceptualizes diversity management as comprising three interconnected elements: recruitment and outreach, valuing differences, and implementing pragmatic policies and programs.

The research paper seeks to address this gap by examining, through a quantitative survey approach, how Black bureaucrats perceive DEI initiatives and what impacts they believe these initiatives have. The study focuses specifically on Black bureaucrats to illuminate how race and ethnicity shape the experience and perception of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives within public organizations. Black public servants have historically occupied a complex and often contradictory position in the American bureaucracy. On the one hand, Black workers have long turned to public sector employment as a pathway to economic stability and professional advancement, especially when private sector opportunities were closed due to racial discrimination (Kellough & Naff, 2004; Riccucci, 2002). On the other hand, public agencies have often replicated broader societal patterns of racial exclusion, marginalization, and tokenism, limiting advancement opportunities for

Black employees and diminishing their influence within bureaucratic structures (Alexander, 2012; Gomez, 2021).

Despite decades of formal commitments to diversity, Black bureaucrats continue to report experiencing disproportionate barriers to promotion, workplace discrimination, and skepticism regarding the sincerity and effectiveness of organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives (EEOC, n.d.; Partnership for Public Service, 2022). These lived realities make Black public servants a critical group for evaluating whether diversity management policies are perceived as authentic, equitable, and impactful. Moreover, Black employees often occupy frontline roles in health, education, and social services sectors where the connection between workforce diversity and public service outcomes is especially salient. As such, their perspectives provide essential insight into how DEI policies influence internal organizational culture and the quality-of-service delivery to historically underserved communities.

Focusing on Black bureaucrats also addresses a significant gap in the literature. Much of the existing scholarship on diversity in public administration aggregates underrepresented groups into broad categories, obscuring the unique racialized experiences that shape how individuals interpret and respond to DEI initiatives. A more disaggregated approach allows for a deeper understanding of how race, organizational dynamics, and perceptions of inclusion intersect. By centering Black voices, this study contributes to a more nuanced and equity-focused understanding of diversity management in public administration.

Public administration and most social sciences accept Black respondents as a monolith. However, the diversity within the Black community extends beyond simple demographic differences, encompassing a wide array of cultural, political, and socioeconomic backgrounds that shape their views on representation and DEI initiatives. This diversity means that Black Americans' experiences and perspectives on DEI are influenced by many factors, including their ethnicity, the length of time their families have been in the United States, their economic status, educational background, and regional differences. For instance, the experiences of African Americans whose families have lived in the United States for generations are often deeply rooted in the historical context of systemic racism and civil rights struggles. In contrast, Black immigrants and their descendants may not view these issues as influencing them in modern times. They may question the need for DEI initiatives or have different goals for these initiatives, such as navigating a new culture and establishing a new identity (Christie, 2023). These differences can influence how individuals perceive the effectiveness and authenticity of DEI efforts. For example, Black immigrants might prioritize different aspects of DEI initiatives, such as language inclusion and cultural representation, compared to African Americans, who might focus more on addressing systemic racism and historical injustices.

Theoretical Foundations

Organizational-level diversity management draws on several theoretical frameworks. Representative bureaucracy theory remains foundational, particularly the distinction between passive and active representation (Mosher, 1968; Selden, 1997). However, recent work shifts the focus from demographic reflection to internal mechanisms that enable employees to advocate for

underrepresented communities. Human resource management and organizational behavior theories conceptualize diversity as a strategic asset, as seen in the resource-based view (Barney, 1991) and organizational learning theory (Argyris & Schön, 1978). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and inclusion models (Nishii, 2013) further highlight how leadership behavior, cultural norms, and perceptions of inclusion shape employee experiences within diverse workplaces.

The increasing recognition of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives as essential components of effective public administration has led to a growing body of research examining their impact on fostering inclusive environments, promoting equity, and addressing the diverse needs of community members (Blesset et al., 2019; Svara and Brunet, 2020; Cepiku and Mastrodascio, 2021). Central to this discourse is the role of Black bureaucrats, who play a pivotal part in shaping and implementing these initiatives within public organizations. Calls to recognize equity as a critical component of governance started in the late 1960s following the Civil Rights movement.

During this time, scholars of public administration began to challenge traditional paradigms, which focused on treating government as a business and prioritizing cost-effectiveness and performance. Equity became a new pillar of public administration, spearheaded by Frederickson at the 1968 Minnowbrook Conference. This new train of thought attracted a new following and ushered in a new era of public administration. NPM emphasizes the need for public service employees to focus on equity for the public (Guy and McCandless, 2020). Advocates have continued to demand a more socially responsive and ethically driven public service that actively promotes social equity and justice. Social equity work emphasizes the need for bureaucrats to actively address disparities and injustices in

their communities actively. Frederickson suggests that equity requires proactive measures, including affirmative action and targeted policy interventions, to rectify historical and systemic inequities (1971;1990). However, translating these theoretical principles into actionable policies can be challenging.

While social equity should be a top priority for government officials, a disconnect often exists between the theory of social equity and its practical implementation. Policies may be well-intentioned but fail to achieve their desired outcomes due to inadequate resources, a lack of political will, or resistance from those within and outside the organization (Enders et al., 2020; Kiradoo, 2023). Efforts to promote social equity can encounter resistance from various quarters, including within public agencies themselves. This resistance can stem from ideological opposition, lack of support from management, colleagues, and community, or fear of redistributive policies (Theoharis, 2008; Lerma et al., 2020).

DEI Initiatives in Public Administration

The origins of DEI initiatives in public administration can be traced back to the Civil Rights Movement, which laid the groundwork for incorporating diversity into workplaces and educational institutions (OLMS, 2023). Over the decades, public organizations have progressively adopted DEI initiatives, initially driven by compliance with legal mandates aimed at preventing discrimination. These initiatives have evolved to encompass more proactive measures, including diversity training, strategic planning, and the establishment of diversity councils (OPM, N.D.; DOC, 2023). Contemporary DEI efforts have been further heightened by social movements such as Black Lives

Matter, prompting organizations to reevaluate and deepen their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Toll, 2023).

Despite the progress made in DEI efforts, Black bureaucrats continue to face significant challenges within public organizations. These challenges include limited opportunities for career advancement, inadequate support for their initiatives, and the persistent presence of systemic biases (EEOC, n.d.; Partnership for Public Service, 2022). The literature suggests that addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that includes policy reforms, targeted professional development programs, and a cultural shift toward genuine inclusivity (Bartnett, 2020; Olzmann, 2020). The pursuit of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has become a cornerstone of modern organizational management. Creating an inclusive organizational culture is recognized as a foundational aspect of effective diversity management.

Organizational Practices and Strategies

Empirical studies document a range of diversity management practices at the organizational level. These include recruitment and retention strategies, inclusive leadership training, mentorship programs, diversity-linked performance evaluations, and employee resource groups (Riccucci, 2002; Pitts, 2006). Sabharwal (2014) stresses the importance of going beyond numerical representation to address structural barriers. For instance, inclusive policies should be paired with workplace flexibility, transparent promotion criteria, and mechanisms for addressing bias and discrimination.

Meier and O'Toole (2010) find that workforce diversity improves outcomes such as innovation and responsiveness, but only when supported by inclusive cultures and competent management. Wise and Tschirhart (2000) caution that poorly institutionalized diversity efforts may backfire, resulting in symbolic compliance reinforcing cynicism and internal divisions. Organizational behavior scholars have begun to address diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) through a critical lens, questioning the effectiveness of DEI initiatives and their potential long-term impacts. Societal pressures have forced public and private organizations to adopt symbolic diversity measures (Levi & Fried, 2024; Dasborough, 2024). Symbolic diversity efforts are often reflected in mission statements that commit to diversity or in DEI units established to support the organization. However, they tend to focus more on appearance than substantive change. Often, this can result in unintentional adverse effects, such as the belief that it is insincere or that there are unattainable goals.

Inclusion, Leadership, and Organizational Culture

Inclusion is increasingly seen as essential to effective diversity management. It refers to the extent to which individuals feel valued, integrated, and able to contribute meaningfully (Mor Barak, 2015). Sabharwal and Levine (2016) emphasize inclusive leadership—marked by openness, cultural competence, and commitment to equity—as a key determinant of organizational success. However, many public agencies struggle to deeply embed inclusion into their organizational culture due to resistance to change, risk aversion, and weak accountability structures (Riccucci & Saidel, 1997).

Internal and External Dimensions of Diversity Management

Diversity management in public administration operates at the intersection of internal workforce development and external service delivery goals. Internally, it encompasses recruiting, retaining, and promoting underrepresented groups, developing inclusive leadership, and fostering a culture that enables diverse employees to thrive and succeed. Scholars argue that such practices improve job satisfaction, employee engagement, and organizational performance (Nishii, 2013; Sabharwal, 2014). Externally, diversity management enhances the quality, equity, and legitimacy of public service. According to representative bureaucracy theory, a diverse public workforce can better understand and advocate for the needs of diverse communities, particularly in sectors such as health, education, and social services (Selden, 1997; Meier & O'Toole, 2006).

Recent research suggests that internal and external diversity management are mutually reinforcing. Inclusive work environments often lead to improved employee retention and better client outcomes (Mor Barak, 2015; Riccucci, 2002). Inclusive managerial practices, particularly those that empower frontline staff, can enhance decision-making, foster innovation, and improve service delivery. Still, variation exists across public organizations. HR departments may focus more on internal strategies, while program units prioritize equity in service provision. Bridging these domains requires leadership, institutional commitment, and accountability structures that embed DEI goals throughout the organization (Sabharwal & Levine, 2016).

Methodology

The study employs a survey of Black bureaucrats to understand how they experience diversity management initiatives, specifically examining how Black bureaucrats actively engage in diversity management and how organizations promote or hinder their active engagement. We constructed and distributed an original cross-sectional survey to obtain our sample and conducted 12 interviews with Black bureaucrats. Over the past few years, public administration scholars have called for more qualitative or mixed methods work in representative bureaucracy scholarship (Kennedy, 2012; Wilkins and Williams, 2008; Bishu and Kennedy, 2019). This study incorporates measures for Black identity, Black lived experiences working in bureaucratic agencies, and Black intragroup collaboration. Focusing on Black bureaucrats and disaggregating the group allows for a more nuanced understanding of Black bureaucrats (Capers and Smith, 2019).

We obtained a response rate of 50%. Six of the 20 prospective participants we contacted initially agreed to participate; however, one did not attend the scheduled interview. Four individuals declined, and ten did not respond. To supplement the sample, we employed a snowball sampling method. In total, we conducted eight interviews. All participants held government positions at various levels: two at the federal level, three at the city level, and three at the state level. We utilized data from two distinct participant groups to examine perceptions of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. The first group, recruited through Prolific, consisted of 84 respondents. The second group, drawn from the National Forum for Black Public Administrators (NFBPA), comprised 16 respondents. We conducted a comparative analysis of these two groups to assess variation in their

responses. The Prolific sample was composed primarily of entry-level professionals, while the NFBPA sample included individuals across entry-, mid-, and upper-level management roles. Our analysis focused on a subset of key variables relevant to the study's objectives.

Variables of interest

The variables of interest were rated on a 0-7 rating scale, ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Agree Strongly". The higher on the scale, the more you agree. The measures used were as follows: I have benefited from DEI initiatives. (Coded as benefits me). This question was asked to gauge whether Black bureaucrats felt these DEI efforts benefited Black employees. We can see in Figure 1 that the number of respondents from Prolific is slightly higher than that of those from NFBPA. This could be due to the difference in positions and tenure. Those newer to the organization may feel that DEI has had some influence on their getting the job, versus more tenured respondents.

The following variable measures whether Black bureaucrats feel that most DEI efforts benefit Black employees. Respondents in both groups agree more with this measure than the previous one, which benefits me. There is still a small gap between the two groups and their feelings towards DEI and the benefits to Black employees. This may be due to the lack of diversity in their organizations. The positive reflection of Black bureaucrats towards DEI efforts is further demonstrated in their belief that these initiatives benefit not only themselves but also the broader Black community. This dual perception stems from DEI efforts to address systemic inequities and expand opportunities for Black individuals within bureaucratic institutions and broader society. The data may also further suggest

that Black bureaucrats see DEI efforts as instrumental in creating more supportive, inclusive, and equitable environments.

Figure 1 illustrates that Black bureaucrats generally disagree with the perception that most Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts are a waste of time. This suggests a relatively optimistic view of DEI initiatives among Black bureaucrats, indicating that they recognize the potential value and impact of these efforts. This finding aligns with broader perspectives within the Black community, which often views DEI initiatives as beneficial for fostering inclusion, reducing disparities, and promoting equitable treatment within organizational contexts.

Much criticism has been directed at DEI initiatives as being excessive and not offering sufficient support. Figure 8 shows that Black bureaucrats in both groups appear to share a similar perception that most DEI efforts benefit the organization more than those they seek to serve and support. Although Black bureaucrats tend to lean more positively towards DEI initiatives, this underlying perception may be that organizations are only in it for themselves; however, good can also come out of it. We see numerous public organizations with a strong history of embracing diversity, while other organizations may lack this diversity, leading to better hiring practices. However, Black bureaucrats are still paid less than their white colleagues and are least likely to be in upper management positions.

Results

The findings suggest that members of the NFBPA leadership organization and the general public hold differing views on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in the workplace.

When asked who benefits from DEI efforts, respondents in the national sample consistently agreed more with the statements than those in the leadership organization. Although responses in both groups hovered around the midpoint of 4 on a 7-point scale, the national sample showed the following results: Benefits Me, 4.45; Benefits Employees, 4.74; and Benefits Clients, 4.76. In contrast, the leadership organization sample responses clustered closer to the midpoint: Benefits Me, 3.88; Benefits Employees, 3.88; Benefits Clients, 4.06.

Responses to the statements critical of DEI efforts, such as "DEI is a waste of time" and "DEI benefits the organization [more than the individuals]," further illustrate these differences. Members of the leadership organization were more likely to reject these critiques. On average, they rated the statement "DEI is a waste of time" at 2.69, compared to the 3.08 in the national sample. Similarly, agreement with "DEI benefits the organization more" was slightly lower among the leadership organization (4.31) than in the national sample (4.51). Of all five questions, the leadership organization agreed with the statement "DEI benefits the organization more," as they agreed with most. The general public agreed that DEI benefits clients the most. While these differences are modest, they indicate a significant divergence in opinion between those who voluntarily affiliate with a leadership organization and the general public. The sample affiliated with the leadership group might value collective action and the broader group more than the individual. The general public is trained to think about those they serve and the implementation of policies.

Figure 14: Opinions of who DEI benefits in the Workplace

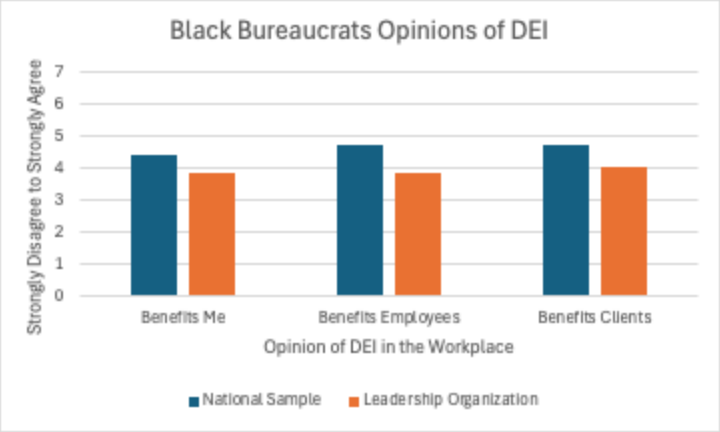
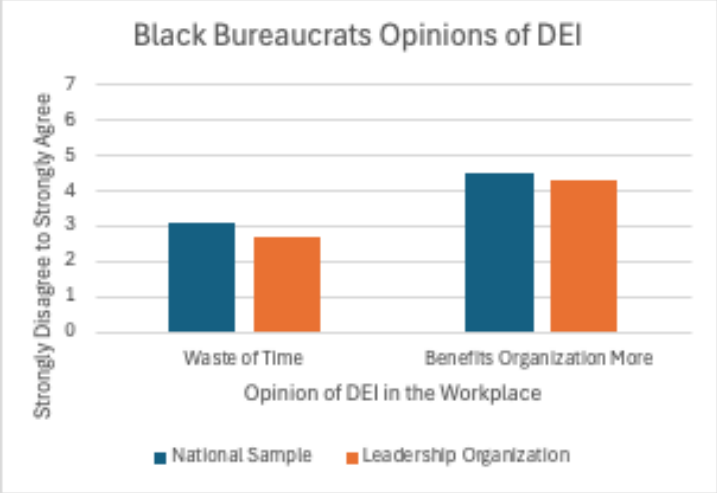


Figure 15: Critical opinions of DEI in the workplace



Discussion

Diversity management is critical in advancing equity and inclusion within the public administration literature. Social equity has become a recognized pillar of the field and a core component of many public administration curricula. However, the field rarely examines whether

bureaucrats implementing these values perceive DEI initiatives as meaningful or beneficial in their workplace.

Ideally, individuals who join leadership organizations such as the NFBPA do so to access a range of benefits shaped by historical and environmental factors (Smith, 1994; Hager, 2014). Beyond these contextual drivers, members are often motivated by a commitment to public goods and collective outcomes, which indicates a voluntary association and a professional identity (Knoke, 1988; Hager, 2014). The motivations suggest that leadership organization members may view DEI efforts through a distinct lens. Members might evaluate the initiatives not only in terms of individual benefit, but also in terms of their alignment with collective professional values.

The difference in attitudes toward DEI initiatives between leadership organization members and the general public has significant implications for how such initiatives should be designed, communicated, and implemented. Our findings suggest that DEI efforts must be framed in terms of mutual and institutional benefits, rather than simply compliance measures or abstract commitments to equity. Prior research has shown that individuals who voluntarily engage in leadership organizations are often driven by intrinsic motivations tied to their values and perceived alignment with organizational missions (Young & Berlan, 2021).

Organizations should consider how professional norms influence attitudes toward Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). Leadership organizations often embody norms of meritocracy, neutrality, and managerial authority. These norms can foster skepticism toward DEI, especially if such efforts are perceived as forced or misaligned with institutional goals.DEI programming might gain greater traction when framed around skill-building, data-informed decision-making, and leadership

development—approaches that resonate with the values of members who consciously opt into such organizations. More broadly, the findings underscore the importance of developing differentiated strategies to engage diverse audiences. While inclusive messaging or exposure to DEI through graduate education may be effective in shaping public opinion, leadership organizations require more targeted and strategic interventions to achieve their goals.

The findings emphasize that DEI is often seen as an insufficient symbolic effort. Programs perceived as tokenistic or externally imposed frequently fail to produce meaningful change and can generate backlash (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Dobbin & Kaley, 2016). Organizations should invest in structural and sustained interventions that move beyond statements of support. A one-size-fits-all approach to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is neither efficient nor effective. DEI initiatives must be tailored to the organization's culture, professional identity, and perceived benefits.

Conclusion

Opportunities for enhancing DEI initiatives lie in fostering a more inclusive organizational culture that values the contributions of Black bureaucrats and other marginalized groups. This involves creating pathways for meaningful participation in decision-making processes, ensuring equitable access to resources, and recognizing the diverse experiences and perspectives that enrich public administration (Rice, 2004).

While most Black bureaucrats recognize the benefits of DEI for themselves and the Black community, there is a clear perception that organizations undertake these initiatives primarily to benefit the organization. This could mean that bureaucrats are facing these pressures with no benefits

in return. Considering that Black bureaucrats are least likely to hold upper management positions and are often relegated to entry-level positions in the government, this could be a reflection of that.

Although DEI initiatives hold great promise, significant questions must be addressed to ensure their success and promote equity. Black bureaucrats face unique barriers that can hinder their effectiveness in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goals. As stated before, Black bureaucrats are least likely to be in positions where they can actively make a change and actively pursue the objectives of the initiatives, meaning there is a focus on hiring to create a diverse organization. Still, bureaucrats may lack the support to move into the decision-making spaces.

Despite these challenges, numerous opportunities exist to enhance the effectiveness of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. This includes ongoing employee training and development, creating channels for feedback and dialogue, and ensuring that DEI goals are integrated into all aspects of organizational operations. There also needs to be as much focus on DEI outcomes for employees as there is on outcomes for clients.

Black bureaucrats play a crucial role in shaping and implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives within public organizations. Their perceptions of these initiatives are shaped by their personal and professional experiences, as well as the organizational culture in which they work. By drawing on diversity management literature and DEI studies, public organizations can create more inclusive and equitable environments that fully leverage the talents and perspectives of Black bureaucrats. Addressing the challenges and barriers that hinder DEI initiatives will require sustained commitment, resources, and a willingness to engage in meaningful systemic change.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Diversity (noun): The condition of having or being composed of different elements; variety, *especially* the inclusion of people of different races, cultures, or social backgrounds.

Equity (noun): Fairness or justice in the way people are treated. *Often specifically*: freedom from disparities in the way people of different races, genders, etc, are treated.

Inclusion (noun): The act of including or the state of being included. 4. The act or practice of including and accommodating people who have historically been excluded (because of their race, gender, sexuality, or ability). (All definitions from Merriam-Webster.)

These are the dictionary definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion, also known more colloquially as DEI. While often discussed in abstract terms, DEI policies are tangible frameworks developed to ensure equal opportunity, safety, and fairness for historically marginalized populations. The principles are rooted in generations of struggle. People have marched, protested, been imprisoned, and even lost their lives to fight for the most basic civil rights that DEI policies seek to preserve and extend. Yet in the current U.S. political climate, DEI has become highly politicized and deeply polarizing. Rather than being seen as mechanisms for justice and fairness, DEI efforts are often portrayed as threats to meritocracy, institutional efficiency, or "American values." Some critics claim that DEI initiatives favor individuals who are "less qualified"< while others argue that they enforce ideological conformity. Increasingly, politicians have cast DEI as synonymous with the "woke liberal agenda", a framing that turns equity and inclusion into partisan flashpoints. The shifts in public

discourse sparked my interest in gaining a deeper understanding of contemporary public opinion on DEI policies.

To empirically explore these dynamics, I designed a 15-treatment survey experiment using the context of higher education, a sector currently at the center of legislative efforts to restrict DEI programming. I analyzed dozens of university statements explaining why DEI programs were adopted and found four recurring rationales: 1) DEI is a best practice according to experts; 2) DEI prepares students to compete in a diverse labor market; 3) DEI reflects the university's moral and social obligations; and 4) DEI efforts were student-led and arose from grassroots activism. These four justifications became the basis for the pro-DEI treatments in my survey. However, simply asking participants whether they "support DEI" would not sufficiently capture the nuances of public opinion, especially given the influence of political rhetoric. Across media outlets, DEI is repeatedly invoked by conservative figures as a problem to be eliminated, framed as wasteful, irrelevant, or un-American. To reflect this, I created opposition vignettes based on recurring political talking points: DEI is not the university's job, and that DEI is part of a radical woke agenda. These are embedded within the survey to simulate realistic exposure to anti-DEI messaging.

The results reveal that exposure to opposition significantly dampens support for DEI programs, regardless of the rationale used in the pro-DEI message. On average, participants were less likely to support DEI initiatives when an opposing viewpoint was presented, suggesting that anti-DEI rhetoric is effective in shaping or shifting public opinion. The findings underscore the persuasive power of symbolic framing over rational or moral appeals.

In the second empirical chapter, I examine whether people maintain their support for state funding bans on DEI programming even when informed about potential consequences. Notably, the data indicate that approximately half of the sample continues to support the bans despite these warnings, suggesting that opposition to DEI is not primarily driven by pragmatic considerations but rather reflects deeply held values and ideological positions. Political ideology and conservative ideology were strongly correlated with support for the ban; however, the data also showed that some Democrats and liberals supported funding bans, indicating that discomfort with DEI cuts across party lines, albeit minimally.

The third chapter shifts from public opinion to organizational behavior by focusing on the perspectives of Black bureaucrats, the very individuals often tasked with implementing DEI policies in the workplace. The results come from two surveys: one using a national sample recruited from a survey firm and another drawing from a leadership organization serving Black professionals in government. Across a series of attitudinal items, the leadership sample was significantly more skeptical of DEI efforts. The respondents were more likely to disagree that DEI policies benefited themselves, their colleagues, or their organizations. The finding challenges the common assumption that all marginalized employees uniformly support DEI initiatives. Instead, it suggests that DEI efforts framed as compliance or symbolic performance may alienate even those they intend to empower. To be effective, DEI must be articulated in terms of mutual and institutional benefit, not just metrics, mandates, or moral obligation.

Together, these chapters illustrate a complex picture of DEI's contemporary challenges. Public support is vulnerable to political rhetoric; ideological commitments often override practical

considerations; and even those expected to carry out DEI work in bureaucracies may be disillusioned or skeptical. As debates around DEI continue to unfold it is crucial to engage in both symbolic and structural dimensions of this work, recognizing that the fight for inclusion must be as strategic as it is principled.

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Chapter Two

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Appendix

V1

${e://Field/College} is announcing the addition of a required Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) course for all undergraduate students. “The addition of the DEI class reflects the needs of a changing workforce and will enhance the ability of our students to be competitive in the job market in their post-grad life,” says Tim Wilson, a university official.

The university plans to roll out the required DEI course in the 2024-2025 school year.

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Some state legislators have pushed against the creation of the course. “Every student, as a condition of obtaining a degree from the university, is forced to spend time and tuition dollars on DEI. It goes outside the core mission of the university,” says State Representative Scott Johnson.

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V10

${e://Field/College} is announcing the addition of a required Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) course for all undergraduate students. “The addition of the DEI class reflects best practices in the field of higher education and is an important step in our work towards improving critical thinking, learning outcomes, and student success,” says Tim Wilson, a university official.

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V13
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