

Racial Representation and Leadership at International Organizations

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Abstract

This paper uses a survey experiment to identify the effects of race on people's perceptions of job performance at the leadership level of the United Nations, employing a hypothetical scenario that involves sexual exploitation and abuses by UN peacekeepers. We find a consistent and statistically significant positive result for the East Asian leader, who was least likely to be punished for UN reform failure and was perceived to be more ethical, more competent, more trustworthy, less selfish, and less ruthless than the African or Caucasian leaders. These findings push us to consider how much race and racial politics affect representation at international organizations, and the wider implications of these effects for understanding the evolution of the international order.

Introduction

In contemporary mainstream international relations (IR) literature, race has not featured prominently as a variable to explain the functioning of the international system. This is somewhat peculiar given that in the early decades of the 20th century, the “race question” was front and center in IR scholarship, in the sense of how the European powers ought to deal with the “colored” people of the colonized world. W.E.B. Du Bois predicted that the global “color line” would become one of the world’s biggest challenges (Du Bois 1961; Karenga 2003). At that time, international relations between countries as well as between people of European descent and the rest of the world were almost exclusively framed in racial and civilizational terms (Vitalis 2015). And indeed, the horrors of World War II did prompt a more open discussion of the relationship between war and race, for as the 1945 UNESCO Constitution stated, it had been “a war made possible by the denial of democratic principles of the dignity, equality, and mutual respect for men, and by the propagation in their place, through ignorance and prejudice, of the doctrine of the inequality of men and races” (Lauren 1988, 136).¹ This led eventually to the inclusion of “race equality” in the Charter of the United Nations.

Yet despite the establishment of the United Nations, as well as the surge of independence movements around the world and the collapse of colonial empires, the topic of race/racism somehow disappeared (or became silenced) in mainstream IR scholarship (Vitalis 2000). In the post-WWII, America-dominated IR field, scholarly attention has shifted to the study of international relations through seemingly universal lenses, such as the structure of the international system, power, institutions, and so forth (Henderson 2014). Even in constructivist scholarship, despite claims to focus on identity questions, explicit engagement

¹ The UNESCO Constitution can be found at http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/UNESCO_E.PDF.

with the race variable is rare (Doty 1998; Geeta and Nair 2003; Persaud and Walker 2001). This prompts several questions: How much purchase does race have on people's understanding of international relations? Are we living in genuinely a post-race world where true equality among races has been achieved? If not, what effect does race have on the functioning of international relations? With respect to international organizations (IOs), does the racial background of the leaders at these organizations have a differential effect? What are the meanings and consequences of various racial representations in the leadership of IOs?

This research note presents a novel analysis using a survey experiment to explore whether the racial background of leaders matters at the United Nations, the most important IO in the post-WWII period. The survey experiment was embedded in an online public opinion survey implemented in the United Kingdom to assess how people's perception of the UN Secretary-General (UNSG) changed in response to the UNSG's racial background. Specifically, we presented the respondents with a scenario that involved sexual exploitation and abuses by UN peacekeepers in conflict zones, and that showed the UNSG failing to properly handle the crisis. We randomly assigned our respondents to four treatment groups, each receiving a picture of the UNSG representing one of four races: African, East Asian, Caucasian, and Latino. We then asked respondents to evaluate the UNSG's performance, among other questions. The findings indicate that racial identity did have an effect, albeit subtle, on perceptions of the UNSG's leadership qualities.

Race, IR, and the United Nations

Racial thinking played a central role in the founding of the IR discipline—by way of illustration, the journal *Foreign Affairs* was previously called the *Journal of Race Development* (Vitalis 2015). As noted earlier, from the late 19th century to the early 20th, a major theme in international relations was how to better manage the people of color in

European colonies (Anievas, Manchanda, and Shilliam 2014, 1; Du Bois 1961, 23).

However, the field of international relations since the end of WWII has been overwhelmingly dominated by American scholarship that simply ignores the race question, instead focusing on more abstract theorization that “whitewashes” the historical content of global affairs (Krishna 2001; Sabaratnam 2018); major IR journals have overwhelmingly omitted race as a variable (Doty 1998).

There are several interpretations of why explicit references to “race” have been dropped from post-1945 IR scholarship. A benign interpretation would posit that this scholarship has stopped being racist. More critical authors would argue that the racist lens has become implicit (Jones 2008). Some posit that it has to do with Westerners’ “colonial-racist guilt syndrome,” explaining that the West has opted for a “subliminal eurocentrism” that pretends race is no longer important in international relations (Hobson 2012). And there are others who assert it was the racial fear of the rise of the Global South that motivated Western countries to replace the international discourse of racism with one of racial equality (Füredi 1998). But are we truly living in a racially equal world? How does race matter in international relations, particularly in international organizations?

It is within this theoretical framework that we would like to explore whether and how racial background matters to leadership at one of the most prominent IOs in the contemporary world: the United Nations. There is ample reason to study the relationship between race and IOs using the case of the United Nations. Racial equality was openly discussed for the first time at the UN among its founding states, when it was established as a post-WWII international organization for peace. Article 1 of the UN Charter states that one of the organization’s main purposes is to achieve human rights and fundamental freedoms “for all

without distinctions as to race, sex, language, or religion” (Lauren 1983, 18).² Although full of contradictions and lacking enforcement mechanisms, the UN was nonetheless “critical to the international status of the postwar challenge to racism, at the same time as its operations remained shaped by racial assumptions and racial prejudice” (Amrith and Sluga 2008, 257).

In the UN system, notwithstanding the dominance and veto powers of the P5 in the Security Council (Voeten 2005), the UNSG represents the United Nations as its chief administrative officer and top diplomat, as well as being an “influential participant in the legal discourse that influences much of global politics” (Johnstone 2003, 441). Indeed, recent campaigns targeting the representation of the UNSG indicate how much importance people have given to this leadership position (Haack 2018).

Research design

We designed a survey experiment, implemented in the United Kingdom, to explore whether or not race affects how people evaluate the qualities and performance of leadership in the UN and that IO’s legitimacy. The experiment begins by providing respondents with the following background information:

We are going to describe a situation the United Nations could face in the future. The situation is general and is not about a specific country in the news today. Some parts of the description may seem important to you; other parts may seem unimportant.

After the introduction, the respondents were randomly divided into five groups, and all of them read the following hypothetical scenario:

² The UN Charter can be found at <https://www.un.org/en/charter-united-nations/index.html>.

Imagine that the United Nations has a new Secretary-General in the future (see above). Under his watch, UN peacekeeping missions have expanded. At the same time, news reports have emerged that thousands of women and children in conflict zones have claimed they are victims of sexual abuse and exploitation at the hands of UN peacekeeping forces sent in to protect them.

In response, the UN Secretary-General urged the public to not incriminate all peacekeepers for the actions of a few. He also established a zero-tolerance policy and instituted a number of reforms to address sexual abuse by peacekeepers. Yet sexual abuse continues to plague UN peacekeeping missions as more allegations of sexual abuse surface against peacekeepers.

For four of the five groups, we included a photo of the hypothetical UNSG; all in the photos were male, and each was from one of four different races: Latino, East Asian, African, and Caucasian (see Figure 1). We picked photos shot in a similar way, with the only major difference being the individual's race. In the control group, respondents did not see a photo of the new UNSG.

Figure 1: Four Photos of the Hypothetical UNSG



Note: From left to right are Latino, East Asian, Caucasian, and African UNSGs. Photos taken from shutterstock.com.

On the next page of the survey, we summarized the information for the respondents, again showing them the picture of the new UNSG:

Just to review, the new UN Secretary-General...

[Picture shown]

- *has seen thousands of sexual abuse cases lodged against peacekeepers under his watch.*
- *has instituted reforms to tackle these problems by peacekeepers.*
- *continues to see sexual abuse allegations continue unabated.*

We then asked a couple of questions regarding the performance and qualities of the UNSG in the scenario. First, we asked: “Do you agree or disagree that the Secretary-General should be punished for how he handled the reforms?” The possible answers were: “agree,” “disagree,” and “neither agree nor disagree.” Second, we asked respondents to rate the UNSG on the following five qualities: ethical, selfish, ruthless, competent, and trustworthy. The response choices were from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much).

Findings

We implemented the survey using a crowdsourcing platform based in the UK. Respondents were randomly drawn from the platform’s online subject pool. The survey was in the field between November 15 and 19, 2018, yielding a total of 1,600 responses.

The median and mean ages for our respondents were 39.5 and 37 years old, respectively. About 66% of the respondents were female. In terms of geographical locations, the vast majority of the respondents lived in England (85.3%), followed by Scotland (8.5%), Wales (4.6%), and Northern Ireland (1.6%). The sample was highly educated, with 31% having a bachelor’s

degree and 13.1% having postgraduate degrees. About 74% were self-employed or employed full-time, and they were generally spread across the spectrum of professions. The self-reported median household income was between £30,000 and £40,000 a year. The majority of our respondents self-identified with the Labour Party (40.6%), followed by the Conservative Party (18.9%) and the Liberal Democrat Party (8.1%). More than a third of the respondents reported paying a great deal or a lot of attention to news about national politics on TV, on radio, in printed newspapers, or on the Internet.

Overall, the above demographics suggest that our sample represented younger, richer, better educated, and more informed portions of the British population than the average person.³ These demographic profiles are similar to online samples drawn in other studies.⁴ While recent works in public opinion research confirm that online samples in the US tend to differ from population-based samples on many demographic and political variables,⁵ these same authors also show that researchers can still make credible and generalizable inferences based on online samples.⁶

We first look at whether UNSGs of some race(s) were more likely to be held responsible for the failure of the reform. Figure 2 plots the proportions of respondents in the four treatment groups and the control group who agreed that the UNSG should be punished for how he handled the reform. When no racial information was given, 31.4% of the respondents agreed that the UNSG should be punished. While there are no statistically significant differences between the control and the treatment groups, we do see the responses diverge among the

³ According to the Office of National Statistics, the median age of the UK population was 40.2 in 2015; the median household income was £28,400 in 2018; and 27.2% of the population aged 16 to 74 had a degree or equivalent or higher in 2012.

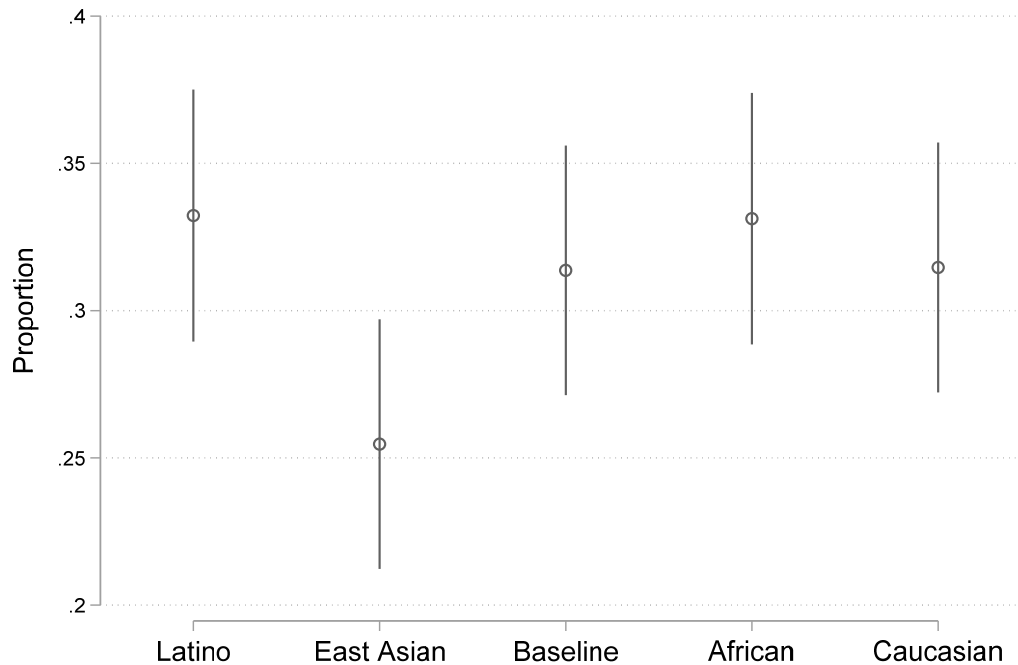
⁴ For the United States, see Huff and Tingley (2015). For China, see Li, Shi and Zhu (2018).

⁵ See, for example, Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz (2012); Clifford and Jerit (2014); Krupnikov and Levine (2014).

⁶ In the following analyses, we present unweighted results, which are very similar to results from the sample with post-stratification weighting on gender and age. These results are available upon request.

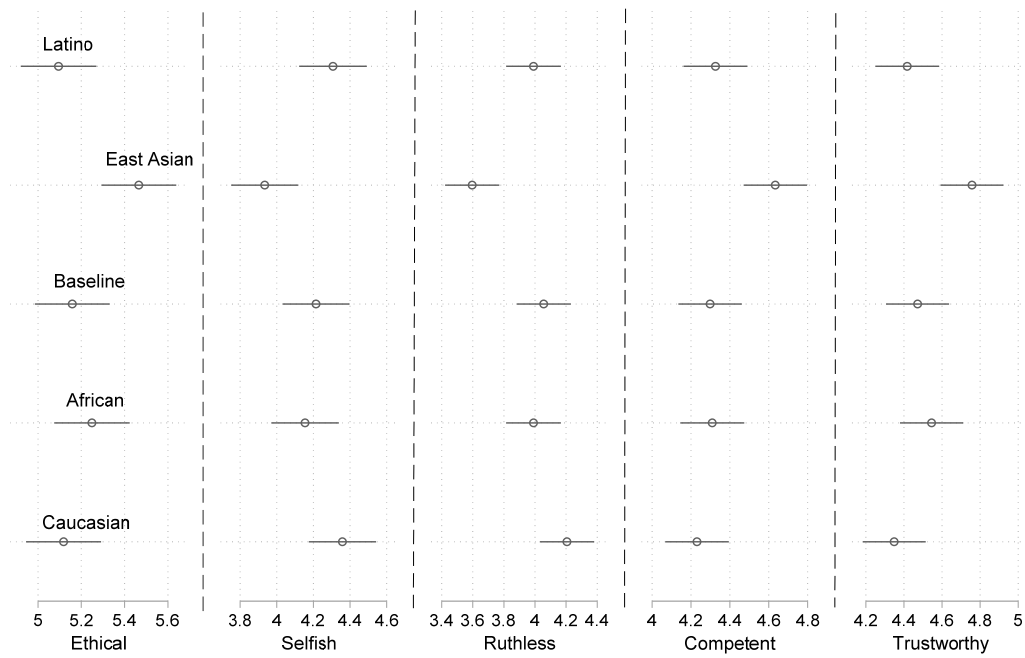
treatment groups. In particular, respondents were less likely to punish an Asian UNSG (25.5%) than the others, and the differences are statistically significant for Latino and African UNSGs.

Figure 2: Treatment Group's Likelihood of Punishing UNSG



We now turn to the ratings of the five qualities of the UNSG, which are plotted in Figure 3 for the treatment and control groups. A similar pattern emerges here. The East Asian UNSG is considered more ethical, competent, and trustworthy and less selfish and ruthless than UNSGs of other races, particularly Latino and Caucasian, as well as in comparison with the UNSG with no head shot, for the baseline group.

Figure 3: Treatment Groups' Ratings of UNSG Qualities



By virtue of random assignment, we can be confident that the differences between responses to East Asian versus other races are a result of the visual stimuli the respondents received rather than other individual-specific factors. That being said, we can further increase the precision of our estimates through covariate adjustments.⁷ Table 1 presents the results of six models corresponding to the six outcome measures in Figure 2 and 3. In model (1), we use logistic regressions because the dependent variable is binary (punish or not). For the rest of the models, we use OLS regression for the continuous measures of the five qualities. In all of the models, we include four dummy variables corresponding to the control group and three of the four treatment groups. The East Asian treatment group is the baseline. The control

⁷ Recent studies (e.g. Montgomery et al. 2018) advise against the use of post-treatment controls in randomized controls, as biases can arise if the post-treatment measures are correlated with the treatments themselves. We performed balance checks and confirmed that none of the post-treatment measures are correlated with the treatment assignment. These results are available upon request.

variables include respondents' gender, income (measured on an 11-point scale), party affiliation (Conservative versus others), and age.⁸

The first thing to note from Table 1 is that the direction and statistical significance of the coefficient estimates for the three treatments are consistent with the simple mean comparisons reported in Figures 2 and 3, lending further support to the findings. This also assures us that randomization worked.

Turning to the other control variables, we see patterns broadly consistent with what would be expected according to conventional assumptions. Male, older, and richer respondents were less likely to hold the view that the UNSG should be punished. They also rated the UNSG higher on ethical and trustworthy and lower on ruthless and selfish. Respondents that identified with the Conservative Party were more likely to punish the UNSG.

⁸ See the appendix for summary statistics.

Table 1: Regression Analyses

	Model (1)	Model (2)	Model (3)	Model (4)	Model (5)	Model (6)
	Punish	Ethical	Selfish	Ruthless	Competent	Trust
Latino	0.331*	-0.314**	0.391**	0.363**	-0.277*	-0.285**
	(0.181)	(0.150)	(0.159)	(0.146)	(0.145)	(0.143)
Baseline	0.262	-0.249*	0.292*	0.454***	-0.333**	-0.250*
	(0.181)	(0.149)	(0.159)	(0.158)	(0.147)	(0.143)
Caucasian	0.279	-0.310**	0.417***	0.595***	-0.422***	-0.372**
	(0.182)	(0.151)	(0.157)	(0.152)	(0.146)	(0.145)
African	0.336*	-0.184	0.206	0.340**	-0.364**	-0.209
	(0.182)	(0.154)	(0.154)	(0.153)	(0.149)	(0.144)
Female	0.206*	-0.499***	0.392***	0.342***	-0.0593	-0.327***
	(0.121)	(0.0987)	(0.103)	(0.102)	(0.0963)	(0.0935)
Income	-0.0437*	0.0343*	-0.0504**	-0.0211	-0.00309	0.0365*
	(0.0253)	(0.0205)	(0.0221)	(0.0212)	(0.0197)	(0.0191)
Conservative	0.323**	0.0312	0.126	0.0340	0.0252	-0.187
	(0.147)	(0.126)	(0.130)	(0.123)	(0.122)	(0.120)
Age	-0.0187***	0.0242***	-0.0320***	-0.0136***	0.00615	0.0287***
	(0.00485)	(0.00405)	(0.00417)	(0.00411)	(0.00409)	(0.00390)
Constant	-0.371	4.693***	5.069***	3.992***	4.438***	3.734***
	(0.256)	(0.212)	(0.219)	(0.224)	(0.216)	(0.204)
Observations	1,516	1,516	1,516	1,516	1,516	1,516
R-squared		0.049	0.056	0.028	0.009	0.052

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Discussion

Our empirical analysis has shown that the racial background of the UNSG has implications for how people evaluate that person. The survey results indicate a consistent and statistically significant positive effect for the East Asian UNSG, who was the least likely to be punished for failed UN reform and perceived to be more ethical, more competent, more trustworthy, less selfish, and less ruthless. How do we make sense of this finding? It is actually a bit puzzling, because the literature on the racial foundations of international relations overwhelmingly portrays a Eurocentric international order wherein the Caucasian race has been the dominant force. Indeed, much of the literature on racism in the West also tends to focus on all the other, colored races being at the receiving end of discrimination and prejudice. Why, then, was this East Asian UNSG perceived more positively than leaders with other racial backgrounds?

One possible explanation is the “model minority” stereotype of East Asians in Western immigration societies (Wu 2013). Originating in the United States in the 1960s, it depicts East Asian immigrants, such as the Chinese and Japanese, as model minorities who celebrate their success through being hardworking and law-abiding, which supposedly disprove the existence of institutional racism that prevents the social mobility of racial minorities, particularly African Americans (Kawai 2005, 114; Omi and Winant 2014). The emergence of East Asian economic miracles, from post-war Japan onwards, has also strengthened this image of East Asian success in many Western societies (Palumbo-Liu 1999). It is plausible that our findings are picking up this positive perception of East Asians as more hardworking and competent than other racial groups.

Related to this model minority stereotype is the image of East Asians as docile, feminine, and non-threatening (Lee 2000; Okihiro 1994; Zhou 2016). This connects with ongoing debates

about East Asian men often being stereotypically portrayed as less masculine and less sexual than men of other races (Chen 1996; Han 2006). In contrast to the hyper-masculine construction of African American and Latino men as sexually aggressive and violent (Slatton and Spates 2014; Mirande 1997), East Asian masculinity instead has been pigeonholed as asexual and/or feminine (Eng 2001). This racial stereotype might be why respondents perceived the East Asian UNSG to be more trustworthy, less selfish, and less ruthless.

Be that as it may, our research findings indicate that race does have an impact on how people perceive leadership quality at international organizations. While our study is one of the first attempts to operationalize the race factor empirically at the IO level, it does point to the need for more consideration of how much race and racial politics affect representation at IOs, and the wider implications for understanding the evolution of the international order.

Representation at the IO leadership level is a highly contested issue. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, for example, have drawn strong criticism; since the days of their inception, the head of the former has always been an American male and the latter a European male, causing some to protest at such a “gentlemen’s agreement” having such prolonged control over the world’s financial institutions (Cogan 2009; Wade 2011). Although the Breton Woods, post-WWII international financial system was established by the United States, so it is perhaps understandable that it reflects American dominance at a particular period of time, its continued operation under the pretense of truly representing the whole world ultimately has become questionable. Representation at IOs does have an obligation to reconcile “conflicting principles of sovereign equality, regionalism, and effective power” (Cogan 2009, 238). Without fair representation, their legitimacy as truly international organizations that represent all of humanity starts to rest on flimsy foundations.

Whether leadership representation at IOs is legitimate or fair depends on observers' perceptions of the leaders' identities. This is particularly the case when the world is changing rapidly as a result of globalization, but also in terms of the power shifts occurring between developed Western countries and emerging powers in the Global South. With such power shifts going on, how the rest of the world perceives the existing leaders at such IOs will certainly matter for their legitimacy. International organizations have paid attention to the need to legitimize themselves, which involves the use of legitimation strategies to convince "different 'social constituenc[ies] of legitimation' of their right to rule" (Gronau and Schmidtke 2016, 536).

There is a nascent literature in IR exploring how the identity of international actors matters for the legitimacy of IOs. For instance, Johnson has shown that unfavorable views toward a particular state result in skepticism about the legitimacy of the IOs in which that state possesses influence (Johnson 2011). Similarly, Bush and Prather's research on election observers in Tunisia indicates that the identity of those observers influences local perceptions of electoral fairness (Bush and Prather 2018). Where UN peacekeeping is concerned, studies have also shown that diversity in the identities of peacekeeping troops has a positive effect on civilian protection (Bove and Ruggeri 2016). Our findings point to race as another dimension, and future research is needed to provide more fine-grained analyses of how race and identity politics are associated with international legitimacy and the changing international order.

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Appendix: Summary Statistics

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max
Punish	1,598	0.31	0.46	0	1
Outcome	1,578	1.92	0.83	1	5
Ethical	1,598	5.22	1.89	1	9
Selfish	1,598	4.19	2.00	1	9
Ruthless	1,598	3.97	1.91	1	9
Competent	1,598	4.36	1.78	1	9
Trust	1,598	4.51	1.81	1	9
Second Term	1,598	0.17	0.38	0	1
Latino	1,600	0.20	0.40	0	1
East Asian	1,600	0.20	0.40	0	1
Base	1,600	0.20	0.40	0	1
Caucasian	1,600	0.20	0.40	0	1
African	1,600	0.20	0.40	0	1
Female	1,600	0.66	0.47	0	1
Income	1,516	3.28	2.32	0	10
Conservative	1,600	0.19	0.39	0	1
Age	1,598	39.49	12.35	20	82