Welcome to the Party? Ethnicity and the Interaction between Potential Activists and Party Gate-Keepers

Short title: Welcome to the Party?

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Abstract

In modern democracies, political parties are the vehicles through which new groups gain political entry. Are parties equally welcoming to all new activists, irrespective of their ethnicity? In a field experiment, we study the responsiveness of local party officials in Sweden who are being contacted by fictitious individuals that want to become active in the party. We find that party officials are more likely to respond, and give informative answers that use a warmer and more welcoming tone, when they are being contacted by an individual with a Swedish name than by an individual with an Arabic name. These discriminatory effects are mainly found when contacting parties on the rightmost end of the political spectrum, but are unaffected by appeals to electoral gain, common ideology, and norms of democratic inclusion. Given the importance of parties as gateways into politics, our findings have troubling implications for equal representation.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Discrimination, Political Parties, Representation, Field Experiments

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Replication Files: Replication files are available in the JOP Data Archive on Dataverse (http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/jop).

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Extant theories place party members and activists at the very center of modern representative
democracies. If political parties fail to mirror the make-up of increasingly diverse electorates,
the legitimacy of political systems will be undermined and the views of substantial segments
of the population will be marginalized. In light of this, a question of paramount importance is
whether everyone is equally welcome in political parties.

In this paper, we focus on how ethnicity shapes the interaction between potential activists
and Swedish party officials. Research has shown that ethnic minorities are often underrepre-
sented among party activists, as well as among those nominated and elected to public office
(Messina, 2004; da Fonseca, 2010; Bloemraad, 2013; Dancygier et al., 2015; Folke, Hughes and
Rickne, 2019). From a normative perspective, this state of affairs is highly problematic, as
it may result in a policy-making process that is not equally responsive to the concerns of all
groups in society, and since it signals that parties and legislatures do not welcome diversity
(Bloemraad, 2013).

To study whether ethnic minorities are equally welcome in parties, we conduct a field
experiment in the run-up to the 2018 Swedish election. In the experiment, we send e-mails
from fictitious individuals to local party officials expressing an interest in joining and becoming
active in the party. We vary the names of the e-mailers to test whether individuals who have
Arabic names receive as many replies as those who have Swedish names. Moreover, we examine
whether the name of the e-mailer affects the tone and information content of replies.

Our experiment is designed to evaluate how welcoming parties are of self-starters (cf. Kalla,
Rosenbluth and Teele, 2018). Self-starters are individuals who become active by their own
initiative, for instance by approaching local party branches. There are several reasons for
focusing on this group. First, this is the most common type of party member. In a recent
Swedish survey, of the more than 8,000 local politicians who responded, the majority stated
that they had joined their party by their own initiative. Second, there are signs that self-
starters make up growing shares of parties’ memberships (Scarrow and Gezgor, 2010). Third,

1 For an overview of theories of political parties that see activists as the key actors, see Bawn et al. (2012).
2 We subscribe to a broad definition of ethnicity that includes attributes that are acquired through historical
inheritance, such as your name, your or your parents’ country of birth and language (Chandra, 2006).
3 This has been show both in studies of Sweden, which is the empirical focus of this paper, and other Western
European countries (Erlingsson, Persson and Öhrvall, 2012; Seyd and Whiteley, 1992).
4 We thank Johanna Rickne for providing us with this data.
self-starters are more likely to engage in party activities and to take on important roles than those recruited by the party.

Our main findings are as follows. First, ethnicity does shape the interaction between potential activists and party officials. We find that officials are more likely to respond, and give more informative answers that use a warmer and more welcoming tone, when they are contacted by an individual with a Swedish name than by an individual with an Arabic name.

Our second key finding is that while there are no gender differences with respect to the outcomes under study, there is evidence which suggests that the discriminatory effects are somewhat stronger for female Arabic names. These interaction effects are, however, less precisely estimated than the main effects under study.

Researchers have also hypothesized that parties may opt for an inclusive strategy when they believe that the associated vote gains may be positive and the perceived ideological differences vis-à-vis the previously excluded groups are not too stark (Dancygier 2017, Heath et al. 2013, Michon and Vermeulen 2013). Therefore, we ask whether potential activists with Arabic names can increase the responsiveness of party officials by appealing to potential electoral gain, common ideological ground, or norms of democratic inclusion. However, our third key finding is that regardless of the type of appeal, the results remain largely the same in that officials are less likely to respond, and give less informative answers that use a less warm and welcoming tone when they are contacted by an individual with an Arabic name.

Lastly, and importantly, we find that discrimination against e-mailers with Arabic names varies with partisanship. While the impact of an Arabic name on all measured outcomes is almost exclusively negative, most of the statistically significant effects are found for the two main right parties. Because of the loss of statistical power that results from breaking down the analysis by party, one should be cautious of interpreting these findings as implying that discrimination is completely absent among parties to the left. However, we can safely conclude that officials on the left tend to discriminate less against potential activists with Arabic names.

5See Whiteley and Seyd 1998 on this point.
6These experimental manipulations allow us to test whether the discrimination we observe against the Arabic aliases is due to party officials using ethnicity to infer the aliases’ capacity to mobilize voters, and also their ideology and democratic values, a behavior which could be viewed as a form of ‘statistical discrimination’ (cf. Butler and Broockman 2011).
Our study advances the literature in several ways. First, while field experiments are common in research on discrimination in the hiring process (Adida, Laitin and Valfort, 2016; Vernby and Dancygier, 2019), and have recently been used to study the interaction between citizens and bureaucrats (e.g. Adman and Jansson, 2017) or politicians’ constituency service (e.g. Butler and Broockman, 2011), our study is the first to study how ethnicity shapes the interaction between potential activists and party officials. Second, and in contrast with recent work which claims that we should expect to see different biases at work in electoral and party politics than in the labor market (e.g. Alizade, Dancygier and Ditlmann, 2019; Dancygier, 2017; Heath et al., 2013; Michon and Vermeulen, 2013), we find that patterns of discrimination are similar across the economic and political spheres. Our findings are thus more closely aligned with research emphasizing the role of ethnic homophily in political recruitment networks (e.g. Soininen, 2011).

Most importantly, however, our finding that an ascriptive characteristic such as ethnic origin determines how welcoming parties are, and that this appears to be unaffected by appeals to potential electoral gain, common ideological ground, or norms of democratic inclusion, has significant implications. In particular, and given the importance of local party branches as a gateway into politics, parties that worry about equal representation should strive to break down prejudice among their local officials.

**Experimental Design**

We employ an e-mail correspondence study with a factorial design. Because of their crucial function as gateways into Swedish politics, local branches of the eight political parties represented in the Swedish parliament were contacted. In total, 2,104 e-mail addresses of all local branches of these parties were collected using the parties’ web pages. The branches were

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7. The study most closely related to ours is by Kalla, Rosenbluth and Tede (2018), but they focus not on the role of ethnicity, but on that of gender in shaping American public officials’ responses to fictitious student e-mailers seeking advice on pursuing a political career.

8. The concept of ethnic homophily refers to the preference for associating with persons from your own ethnic group (e.g. Currarini, Jackson and Pin, 2009).

9. Our study has been registered prior to realization of outcomes in the Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP) registry on June 11, 2018 and was gated until September 10, 2018: ID 20180611AB.

10. They are the Social Democrats, the Conservatives, the Sweden Democrats, the Greens, the Center Party, the Left Party, the Liberals and the Christian Democrats.

11. 92 e-mails bounced, leaving a total of 2,012 e-mails in the analysis.
then contacted by a fictitious e-mailer asking for information on how to become a member, the frequency of party meetings, and the possibility of contributing to the upcoming election campaign. For an example e-mail, see Figure 1. To avoid detection, each addressee received only one e-mail.

To signal the ethnicity of our aliases, half of the e-mail addresses were randomly selected to receive an e-mail signed with an Arabic name, whereas the other half received an e-mail signed with a traditional Swedish name. Two considerations guided our choice to focus on Arabic names: (1) the size of the group and (2) the possibility of observing discriminatory behavior. Today, the foreign-born population in Sweden accounts for approximately 20% of the total population. Sweden has seen a lot of immigration from the MENA region and the Horn of Africa. In addition, the top-five sender countries in which Arabic names are common (Syria, Iran, Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan) account for more than a quarter of the foreign-born, and 6% of the entire Swedish population. Second, and given the novelty of our study, it was considered reasonable to focus on Arabic names, as this increases the likelihood of observing discriminatory behavior. We also randomized whether the letter was signed by a male or a female name. To avoid detection, three male, and three female, first names for each ethnicity were used.

As our factorial design also varied the content of the e-mails by appealing to potential electoral gain, common ideological ground, and norms of democratic inclusion, apart from the contents shown in Figure 1, some e-mails contained an additional opening paragraph where the e-mailer made such appeals. For example, when appealing to electoral gains, e-mails began

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12 All combinations of the letters that were sent out are available in Appendix A, both in original language (Swedish) and translated versions (English).
13 When studying discrimination against individuals with Arabic names, it is rarely possible to disentangle how much of it is due to anti-muslim prejudice and how much of it is due to other aspects the majority population associates with this group (cf. Adida, Laitin and Valfort, 2016).
14 Based on own calculations; see https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/befolkning/befolkningens-sammansattning/befolkningsstatistik/. All figures are exclusive of ‘second-generation’ immigrants.
15 This expectation is based on previous research on ethnic hierarchies in the social and economic spheres (e.g. Vernby and Dancygier, 2019).
16 Statistics Sweden (SCB) provided a list of the most common Swedish and Arabic first and last names from the Swedish population registry of 2017. In the emails, we randomly combined Arabic/Swedish-sounding first names with one of three Arabic/Swedish-sounding last names (See Appendix A).
Figure 1: Example of email sent to the political parties

Hi!

How does one go about becoming a member of [party name]? How often do you meet? Is there any way for me to contribute to the election campaign this fall?

Best
[e-mailer name]

with “Hi! Many of my friends are thinking of voting for [party name] and I’m thinking about doing the same.” When appealing to common ideological ground, e-mails instead began with “Hi! I have long liked (party name’s) policies and would like to be of help in communicating them.” (See Appendix A for more details on the appeals).

We analyze eight outcomes. First, we coded whether the e-mailer received a reply. Second, in order to measure how informative the response was, we counted the number of words in the response, and coded whether it answered any of the e-mailer’s questions, or provided additional information. Third, to capture how welcoming party officials’ were in their response, we coded whether they used the name of the e-mailer in the response, whether they welcome the e-mail, and whether they invite the e-mailer to party activities or suggest a personal meeting.\footnote{Additional details on the coding (including examples and information on inter-coder reliability), as well as descriptive for the outcome variables are given in Appendix A.}

Results

In Table 1 we test whether party officials’ responses differ when the e-mailer has an Arabic name versus a Swedish name. The results come from regressions where we controlled for all treatments, the party of the recipient, as well as the municipality of the local party branch. To avoid selection bias when analyzing the informativeness and tone of the responses, we coded non-responses as zero rather than missing (\textsuperscript{18}Coppock, 2019).

The results show that party officials respond more favorably to e-mailers with Swedish names. Beginning with the response rate, the Arabic aliases have a 7.4 percentage-point lower response rate. This effect is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) and substantively meaningful (the overall response rate was 58%). Turning to the informativeness of the replies, a similar pattern is visible. The replies to Arabic aliases contained fewer words and were considerably less likely to answer any of the e-mailer’s questions or provide additional information. Moving

\textsuperscript{18}Results presented here are similar to those obtained when the analysis excludes non-responses; see Appendix C for details.
### Table 1: Treatment Effects of Arabic Name by Dependent Variable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Mean: Effect:</th>
<th>Mean: Effect:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Response</strong></td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>-0.074***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Information:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Words</td>
<td>50.34</td>
<td>-10.93***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answers Questions</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>-0.097***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Information</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>-0.057***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: N = 2,012. Entries are OLS-coefficients from regressions controlling for the gender of the e-mailer, the types of appeals (electoral, policy, and normative) included in the email, the party of the recipient, and the municipality of the local party branch. Robust standard errors in parentheses. 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>p-value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>* p &lt; 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>** p &lt; 0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*** p &lt; 0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

...to the tone, local party officials were significantly less likely to welcome the e-mail, use the name of the e-mailer in the response, and invite future contacts with themselves or the party when the e-mailer had an Arabic name. All these effects were fairly strong, as can be seen when comparing their size to the means of the outcome variables.

Do these discriminatory effects vary depending on the gender of the e-mailer? In our analysis, we find that while there are no gender differences with respect to the outcomes under study (see Appendix C), there is evidence which suggests that the discriminatory effects against individuals with Arabic names is somewhat stronger for female aliases. These findings are in accord with theories emphasizing the multiple burdens of being a woman and belonging to a minority ethnic group (e.g. King, 2016). However, the interaction effects are, by design, less precisely estimated than the main effects, and are only statistically significant for two of the eight studied outcomes.

Finally, turning away from the ascriptive characteristics of ethnicity and gender towards the types of appeals that the potential activist can make, we find few effects (see Appendix C). The discriminatory effects against individuals with Arabic names remain similar regardless of appeals to electoral gains, common ideological ground, and norms of inclusion. Interestingly, empirical work on descriptive representation has found that immigrant women, compared to their male counterparts, are equally or even less underrepresented among politicians in Sweden and other countries (e.g. Dancygier et al., 2015; Freidenvall, 2015). See also Appendix C8 for an additional analysis of the hypothesis that prospective electoral gains facilitate inclusion.
party officials using ethnicity to infer the aliases’ ideology, democratic values, and capacity to mobilize voters.\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{Extensions}

The extensions reported in this section all study the possibility that the discriminatory effect against Arabic aliases depends on the identity of the official (details are in Appendix C).\textsuperscript{22}

We first checked whether discrimination against Arabic aliases varies with partisanship. Our results show that officials from parties on the rightmost end of the political spectrum are consistently more likely to give preferential treatment to potential activists with Swedish names. When looking at the response rate, the estimated ethnic penalty for the main party on the right (the Conservatives) is five times as bigger than that for the main left-of-center party (the Social Democrats).\textsuperscript{23} One possibility is that this finding is driven by party officials’ responding favorably to those who, based on their ethnicity, are expected to be able to provide more electoral gains, and/or have more similar ideological leanings. Given the lack of impact of the appeals to electoral advantage and policy similarity, however, the partisan findings are not readily explicable within the framework of standard policy- or vote-seeking models.\textsuperscript{24}

We also coded whether party officials who responded had a female-sounding name and whether they had a Nordic-sounding name. This allows us to analyze how the information content and tone (but not the response rate) vary with these individual characteristics of the party officials. While female and male party officials did not differ in their treatment of Arabic aliases, evidence suggests that party officials with Nordic-sounding names respond less favorably to Arabic aliases (see Appendix C). In particular, officials with Nordic-sounding names are less likely to answer questions posed by e-mailers with Arabic names and more likely to treat e-mailers with Swedish-sounding names preferentially when it comes to invitations to personal meetings, suggesting that ethnic homophily may explain preferential treatment (e.g. Currarini, \textsuperscript{21} Butler and Broockman (2011) use a similar strategy to study whether lower responsiveness towards requests from African-American constituents is driven by strategic partisan behavior.

\textsuperscript{22} None of these extension in this section were part of the pre-registered design.

\textsuperscript{23} The exact ethnic penalties are 19.7%-points and 3.9%-points, respectively (only the former is statistically significant).

\textsuperscript{24} Because parties belonging to the traditional right and the radical right have considerably lower shares of foreign-born politicians than do parties belonging to the left (See Table C15 in the Appendix), an alternative explanation for the differences across parties could be ethnic homophily. Below we provide some more direct evidence of this mechanism.
Conclusion

Our study shows that party officials are more likely to respond, and give informative answers that use a warm and welcoming tone, when they are contacted by a potential activist with a Swedish name than by one with an Arabic name. While disaggregated analyses reveal that the impacts of an Arabic alias are almost exclusively negative, most statistically significant effects are found for the two main right parties. While one can discuss how large the impact of each of the individual outcomes is on the numeric representation among party members, activists, and politicians, it is likely that their combined effect will be consequential. Parties that value equal representation should therefore make efforts to ensure that their local party branches are as welcoming of ethnic minorities as they are of members belonging to the majority population.

How generalizable are our findings? First, as has been shown elsewhere, the Swedish immigration experience shares many commonalities with the typical West European immigration experience (Dancygier et al., 2015). Second, despite the fact that Sweden compares favorably to other European countries on measures of social and political inclusion of ethnic minorities, immigrants are severely underrepresented in politics (Dancygier et al., 2015; Folke, Hughes and Rickne, 2019). Finally, the institutional setup in Sweden – proportional representation with party-centered political recruitment (Folke, Persson and Rickne, 2016) – characterizes many West European countries. Taken together, these features of the Swedish immigration history and political system support the conjecture that discriminatory treatment in the political sphere documented in this paper may be similar or even more prevalent elsewhere.

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References


25These results rely on smaller samples than the main results, and should therefore be interpreted with caution.


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