



Political Ideology and Public Sector Work:
Empirical Evidence on the Individual Attitudes
towards Equality and Merit in Public Hiring

Christine Prokop, Michael Jankowski and Markus Tepe

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Political Ideology and Public Sector Work: Empirical Evidence on the Individual Attitudes towards Equality and Merit in Public Hiring

Christine Prokop
christine.prokop@uol.de

Michael Jankowski
michael.jankowski@uol.de

Markus Tepe
markus.tepe@uol.de

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Abstract

While some consider Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policies a valid tool to increase the representativeness of the public workforce, critics claim that EEO policies undermine the merit principle. This study puts this debate to an empirical test. First, we test the role of political orientation and public sector employment in determining the support for active EEO policies in public hiring. Second, we manipulate the potential tension between EEO policies and merit-based hiring using a randomized survey experiment. We use data collected on about 400 students of public administration, 220 public administration employees, and 630 private employees in Germany. Empirical findings can be summarized in two points: First, a rightist political orientation increases opposition towards EEO policies, while public employment increases support. Second, highlighting a potential tension between merit recruitment and migrant representation in the public workforce in the treatment condition increases support for the merit principle among all groups of respondents. However, in particular respondents with a rightist political orientation overemphasize the importance of the merit principle when a potential migrant underrepresentation is mentioned. These findings suggest that preferences for labor market equality in public hiring are highly politicized and vulnerable towards political manipulation.

Keywords: Equal Employment Opportunity policies · Merit-based hiring · Survey Experiment · Political Orientation · Public Private Sector

1 Introduction

The merit principle postulates that promoting and hiring government employees should be based exclusively on candidates' professional qualifications and achievements, rather than other factors such as race, gender or ethnicity. While the merit principle is broadly accepted as the guiding principle in public hiring it is often believed to be in tension with a representative bureaucracy. A bureaucracy is representative if the social characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, race, and gender) of the public workforce reflect the social characteristics of the population the bureaucracy serves. Many states have adopted Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policies in response to underrepresentation of certain societal groups in the public workforce. They aim to overcome the structural inequalities of opportunities particular societal groups face, while merit has been upheld as the premier value. The German public sector traditionally provides good employment chances to female and physically disabled people, but non-natives still face significant entry barriers to the public labor market. In the light of the actual shifts in political climate with increasing populism and animus against migrants throughout Germany and many other European countries it appears urgent to observe who supports EEO policies, and which factors lead to perceiving a "threat" to the merit principle by the demand for a representative public workforce.

In recent years, increasing the share of applicants with a migrant background has become an important component of EEO programs [OECD \(2015\)](#). While advocates of these programs tend to emphasize the chronic underrepresentation of citizens with a migration background in public administration, opponents claim that such programs undermine the merit principle and will therefore lower the quality of public service in the long run. Although public administration literature addresses this phenomenon for a long time ([Kranz, 1974](#); [Kuklinski et al., 1997](#)) recent empirical literature is scarce. Thus, we know little about the questions what drives attitudes towards EEO policies, and which mechanisms lead to perceiving a tension between representation and the merit principle. In this study we explore how both attitudes are related to the individual political orientation and the working sector. This is because we assume that, first, the

taste for who participates in public welfare and labor markets is shaped by the individual political beliefs, and policy measures to increase the share of migrants in labor markets therefore should be evaluated in the light of the personal political attitudes. Second, we want to explore whether public employees hold different attitudes towards this topic than private employees, due to their genuine responsibility and socialization to act as advocates of the state.

We address these questions in two steps on a sample of more than 400 students of public administration, 220 public administration employees, and 630 private employees. In the first part of the study, we conduct a survey asking for the support of EEO policies. We expect that right leaning respondents are likely to oppose EEO policies, while public employees are more in favor of them. Second, we employ a survey experiment allowing to find out who perceives a tension between the merit principle and representation. We expect respondents with a rightist political attitude being more likely to perceive a tension. Public employees and respondents who favor active EEO policies are assumed to perceive this tension to a lesser extent.

We detail our theoretical framework and expectations in section 2 and in section 3 the used method, data and sample. In section 4 we present the empirical analyses. In the last section we provide a summary and discuss the implications of our findings.

2 Theoretical Framework

The merit principle dictates to only hire the best candidates according to their fit to the offered position. This principle roots in the basic right for all citizens to get access to public service depending on their suitability, skills, and professional qualification (German constitution, Article 33 (2)). Rigorously applying this principle ensures equal chances to access administrative power and the advantages of public employment. This principle further allows to prevent from corruption or political influence in public recruitment and thus contributes to the legitimacy, representativeness, and trustworthiness of public ser-

vice. Accordingly, the merit principle is considered the foundation to staff public service with the best candidates to fulfill the sovereign duties of public service (Weber, 1978).

At the same time the composition of the public labor market is still unrepresentative of the society. Empirical evidence suggests that certain societal groups, particularly non-native citizens, remain underrepresented in public service (OECD, 2015). Public service traditionally provides female citizens employment and social mobility chances, but ethnic minorities are still facing entrance barriers (Adida, Laitin and Valfort, 2010; Arai, Nekby and Bursell, 2016; Booth, Leigh and Varganova, 2012; Kaas and Manger, 2012; Midtbøen, 2015; Weichselbaumer, 2017). During the last decades a risen sensitivity for underrepresentation and potentially discriminating behavior in general (with regard to, e.g., age, gender, or disability) has led to the implementation of various anti-discrimination, EEO, and affirmative action policies that are designed to address this problem. This development results in a second principle when it comes to hiring: the ‘representativeness bureaucracy principle’ (Kennedy, 2014; Marvel and Resh, 2015; Meier and Bohte, 2001). While the call for a more representative workforce naturally applies for the entire labor market, the state as employer, however, plays a particularly prominent role in bringing these policies to life. The state is responsible to actively apply EEO policies to act as a role model and send out encouraging signals to the entire labor market.

According to this development, public sector recruitment recently needs to embrace two major principles: Merit recruitment and representativeness of bureaucracy. In the enduring political and public debate about the provision of equal employment chances, critiques stress a tension between these two demands. They emphasize that representation comes at the cost of a lower level of qualification. Although since many years, this discourse is also object to the scholarly discussion (Kranz, 1974) it is still an actual topic with urgent theoretical and practical implications for public policy researchers. At this point it is important to note that the merit principle and the goal of representativeness are not necessarily contradictory. In fact, if discrimination in public hiring is absent and the quality of the applicants does not vary systematically between marginalized and non-

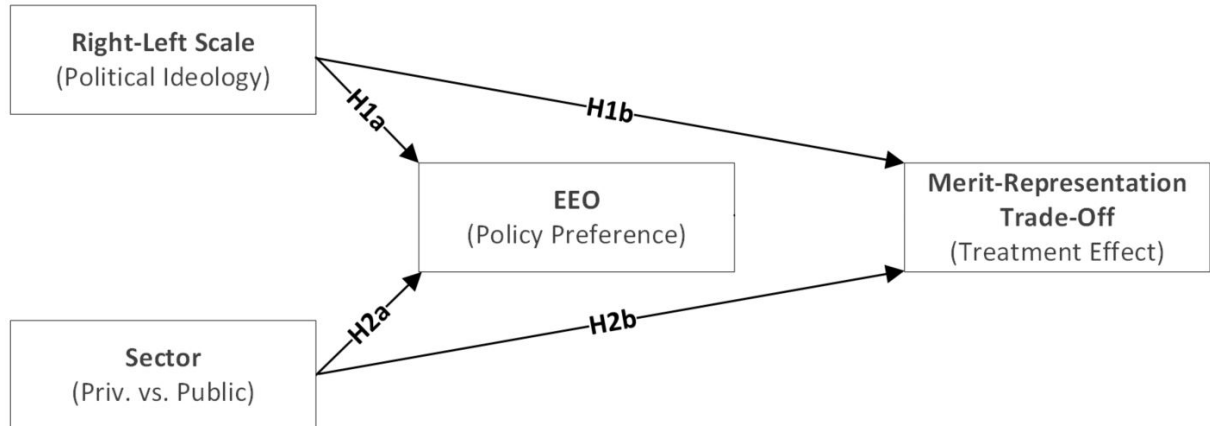
marginalized groups, the rigorous application of the merit principle should be sufficient to ensure equal participation chances and representativeness of the labor market in general and the public sector in particular. There is, however, large evidence that basic and higher education chances differ considerably between certain societal groups due to various reasons. On account of this imbalance in the background and chances of marginalized groups, EEO policies are supposed to outbalance the structural disadvantage that certain candidates have in the application process.

Besides a broad range of research towards EEO policies, affirmative action, or anti-discrimination only few empirical studies measure how attitudes towards racial matters or political attitudes shape preferences for EEO policies or how they relate to the two major hiring principles. [Kuklinski et al. \(1997\)](#), for instance, conducted a list experiment and find that racial prejudice is a prevalent phenomenon in the U.S., but it does not exclusively explain attitudes against affirmative action. In contrast, they find that white Americans favor to support African-Americans, but at the same time oppose affirmative action policies. [Gilens, Sniderman and Kuklinski \(1998\)](#) observe opposing attitudes towards affirmative action along the political spectrum using a list experiment. They find that opposition towards affirmative action is prevalent among Democrats and Republicans as well as people who are committed to racial harmony. However, to the best of our knowledge there are no prior studies observing how political attitudes or public sector affiliation are related to attitudes towards EEO policies in Germany. The German multiparty system reveals different political incentives than the US-American presidential system to express individual attitudes towards immigrants and immigration. Therefore this research provides novel insights in this relationship for the German context. Moreover, we explain whether and which kinds of EEO policies a respondent prefers, and who perceives a tension between the principles of merit based hiring and representation. We therefore employ two explanatory variables: political attitudes and public sector affiliation.

Figure 1 shows the theoretical model underlying this study. First, we ask for the drivers of the attitudes toward EEO policies. We therefore measure the effect of the

individual political orientation and the working sector affiliation on the preferences for EEO policies. In the second part of this study we use the political orientation and the working sector affiliation to explain who perceives a tension between the merit principle and bureaucratic representation.

Figure 1: Stylized theoretical model



2.1 Preferences for EEO policies

In Germany and across most western countries a broad range of EEO policies is employed that vary with regard to their impact on the recruiting process. Anti-discrimination policies, as part of a broader range EEO policies, aim to ensure fair hiring processes by excluding applicant characteristics like age, sex, religion, race, ethnicity, or physical disabilities from the application decision. Affirmative action policies, in contrast, actively favor members of historically underprivileged societal groups, like women or racial minorities, in application processes. In the course of this study, we use the term EEO policies to address the most prevalent kinds of EEO policies including anti-discrimination and affirmative action policies. In particular, our research design includes questions for measures with varying levels of activeness regarding the inclusion of individuals with migrant backgrounds into the public workforce. These measures include legal quotas and voluntary obligation, which both require that employers need to take action towards integrating migrants, and encouragement of migrants as another measure to increase their share in

public service stresses that migrants themselves need to take more action to participate in the labor market. Alternatively, respondents can report to prefer no action at all.

Political orientation and preferences for particular EEO policies are genuinely linked by their overlap within the political arena. We argue that EEO policies touch upon topics that are a vital part of the political process. Whether and how a society should integrate certain societal groups and people originating from foreign countries is typically a core element in political debates regarding the openness of society. Holding a general preference for or a dislike against societal inclusion is known to be related to individual political beliefs and is usually reflected in the political left-right spectrum. Left-wing political attitudes are linked to favouring societal inclusion of any group of citizens in all parts of society, while individuals with right-wing political attitudes are more likely to oppose it (Baekgaard and George, 2018; Ceobanu and Escandell, 2010; Harrison et al., 2006). EEO policies are designed to advance the chances to participate in the labor market for all societal groups. Accordingly, we expect to find more opposition against active EEO policies the stronger respondents identify with the political right (*E1a*).

We further consider differences between the public and private working sector to shape the attitudes towards public policies in general and EEO policies in particular. There are three main reasons why we would assume to find such sector related differences with regard to hiring preferences. First, following Max Weber's bureaucratic theory (Weber, 1978), public service bases on a more hierarchical, rule based environment, that moreover legally demands to perform neutrally and free from personal beliefs. This rule bases environment leads to red tape and stronger formalization than private sector organizations (Villadsen and Wulff, 2018), why the public sector requires and attracts public sector personnel that is particularly prone to follow legal and organizational rules. We argue, that formal training and socialization into the bureaucratic environment further shape the mindset of public employees to follow the given rules (Boyne, 2002; Rainey, Pandey and Bozeman, 1995; Villadsen and Wulff, 2018). Since decades, the German public sector uses obligatory affirmative action policies – mainly regarding women and disabled persons – in public

service recruiting. Therefore discrimination-free recruiting is a well known and basic demand especially in public service.

Second, the scope of the public working sector is to provide public services and goods, which basically differentiates public organizational goals from private entrepreneurship. These sovereign tasks are usually financed by taxes and subject to public observation as well as supervisory authorities. Additionally, top level public service positions are typically filled with political personnel, which altogether requires much more focus on the acceptance of public activities by the general public to maintain legitimacy, than for private company activities (Tolbert and Zucker, 1983; Villadsen and Wulff, 2018). Again, based on this reasoning, employing EEO policies should be much more important to public organizations than to private ones. Combining these special characteristics of public sector work we find that first, obeying rules and norms should be genuine to public employees, and second, they are socialized within an environment that performs EEO policies since many years as a basic feature in the recruiting process. We therefore expect respondents with a public administration background, i.e. the samples of public administration students and employees, to have a higher probability of supporting active EEO policies (*E2a*).

One could argue that this sample effect might be due to social desirability bias. However, we provide all three samples with the same survey questions. We argue that if individuals adapt their response behavior towards a more moderate position on EEO policies, they are aware of a potential socially desired attitude due to their genuine attitudes or socialization. If the positions differ systematically between the public and private samples this outcome can be interpreted as an effect of self-selection and socialization toward neutrality in public service.

2.2 Perceiving a Tension between Merit Hiring and Representation

In addition to the analysis of who supports or opposes certain EEO policies, we draw attention to the supposedly competing relationship between merit recruitment – i.e. the principle that only the level of qualification of an applicant should matter in a hiring situation – and bureaucratic representation – i.e. the principle to descriptively mirror all societal groups in public service. This discourse touches upon important theoretical and practical questions regarding how the chances to access the labor market and administrative power are distributed throughout society. Yet, it is widely unclear why individuals might perceive such a trade-off. For our considerations it is irrelevant whether such a tension or trade-off *actually* exists. Instead, it is sufficient that respondents *might think* that aiming for representation results in hiring applicants which are not the most qualified applicants for the job.

To measure the level of perceived tension between merit hiring and representation, we conduct a survey experiment. In the experiment, we provide respondents with a baseline statement asking for the support for merit-based public hiring. In the treatment condition, the statement is the same but potential migrant underrepresentation by applying the merit-principle is mentioned (the experiment is described in detail in the methods section). With the support for the baseline statement we measure how much respondents care about the merit principle. We refer to this baseline preference as P_{Merit} . In the treatment condition, we measure this preference for the merit principle and additionally the impact of the underrepresentation frame. Thus, in the treatment condition, we measure $P_{Treatment}$ which can be written as $P_{Merit} + \tau$, where τ is the effect of the underrepresentation frame. Thus, τ can be easily identified by subtracting the level of support in the treatment and control condition. For example, a negative value for τ would indicate that the underrepresentation frame decreases the support for the merit principle. The crucial question is: Which value do we expect for τ ? We argue that τ takes different values conditional on the political attitudes and sector affiliation of a respondent.

First, if individuals hold negative attitudes toward the openness of society for marginalized groups they are very likely to disapprove members of these marginalized groups accessing civil service positions and *vice versa*. These preferences for the openness of society is reflected in the political left-right scale. Accordingly, right-leaning individuals might hold a preference for exclusion, while individuals identifying with the political left are more likely to prefer equality for all societal groups (Baekgaard and George, 2018; Ceobanu and Escandell, 2010; Harrison et al., 2006). Hence, the stronger respondents identify with rightist political positions the more we assume that a focus on the merit principle *and* underrepresentation of migrants in the public workforce might both be evaluated positively. The more individuals identify with rightist positions the more they should react to the treatment condition by increasing their support for the merit principle, i.e. τ is increasing. Thus, we expect the more right-wing respondents are the stronger is the treatment effect (*E1b*).

Second, we assume public employees to perceive themselves as advocates of the state. This implies that they obey the legal framework and rules given by their public employer. Hence, public employees should be positive or at least neutral towards the implementation of public policies. Meeting the demand for a representative public workforce, for example by realizing equal employment opportunities, is a major task that the state as employer tries to fulfill for decades. We therefore assume that public employees have incorporated this claim through socialization and indoctrination, which is why they might be willing to decrease their support for the merit principle if this helps making the workforce more representative. Accordingly, we assume that τ is lower for public employees, which means that we should find a smaller treatment effect among the two public samples compared to the private employees sample (*E2b*).

3 Data and Method

3.1 Samples

We use data collected among a total number of 1,266 respondents. The first data set includes 401 voluntarily recruited public administration students at a German university of public administration science (*Verwaltungsfachhochschule*). These students are enrolled in the study programs ‘General Public Administration’ (Bachelor), ‘Public Management’ (Bachelor), and ‘Local Public Management’ (Master). They were invited to voluntarily participate in the survey by the university administration via email distribution lists. The bachelor programs qualify graduates to attend civil service with a pay grade starting with A9 (e.g., *Verwaltungsinspektor*) up to pay grade A13 (e.g., *Verwaltungsoberamtsrat*). After graduating the entire students are usually permanently employed in public service. In total numbers these civil servant groups build the main share of the German public administrative workforce. The universities of public administration science are supported and financed by state-level administrative units. A training contract with one of these supporting institutions is a compulsory precondition for student admission. The master degree enables graduates to enter higher public service positions. Only public employees with long term experience attend these Master study programs. Thus, all students in this sample reveal relevant practical working experience in public administration at the time of this survey and very likely will stay in public service after graduating.

The second data set consists of 228 municipal public servants engaged in human resource management. We recruited these respondents voluntarily using email lists including all German federal states. The third data set was collected on 637 German private sector employees. A nationally operating panel provider (‘respondi’) provided the field access.

3.2 Survey on Preferences for EEO policies

We measure the preferences for EEO policies using the following question: “In your opinion, should there be measures to increase the amount of people with immigrant back-

grounds in public service? Which of these statements do you agree with?”. We provided respondents with five possible answers that capture why respondents might oppose or support certain measures for increasing the share of migrants in the bureaucracy:

1. “No, there is no necessity to increase the amount of people with immigrant backgrounds in public service.”(*Nothing should be done*)
2. “No, nothing needs to be done to increase the amount of people with immigrant backgrounds in public service, it will happen automatically.”(*Automatically*)
3. “Yes, by supporting people with migration backgrounds in the application process for positions in public service.” (*Encouragement*)
4. “Yes, public service employers should voluntarily oblige themselves to hire more people with immigrant backgrounds.” (*Self-commitment*)
5. “Yes, by legally obliging employers in public service to hire a certain quota of people with immigrant backgrounds.” (*Quota*)

The five responses are ordered by the degree of opposition to/support for EEO policies¹. The first option (*Nothing should be done*) indicates a clear opposition to the concept of representative bureaucracy. The second statement (*Automatically*) does not necessarily reflect opposition to a representative bureaucracy, but it indicates opposition to any EEO policies that are supposed to accelerate the representativeness of the bureaucracy. The other three statements reflect support for active EEO policies, but indicate preferences for different measures. The third statement (*Encouragement*) emphasizes that the applicants’ behavior needs to change to increase their success on the labor market, while the last two statements stress that the state as employer needs to take action. These supporting statements therefore differ with regard to the perceived antecedents of migrant labor market underrepresentation and who accordingly should take the responsibility to conquer the problem. The fourth statement (*Self-commitment*) reflects a voluntary commitment of the state to hire more migrants. The fifth and last statement (*Quota*) asks for obligatory

quotas, which indicate the strongest legal obligation public policies can exercise in the field of anti-discrimination.

3.3 Survey Experiment on Perceiving a Tension between Merit and Representation

In sum, three different mechanisms might explain the opposition to EEO policies: The exclusive support of the merit principle, a preference for descriptive representation of migrants, or a preference for the underrepresentation of migrants in the public workforce. However, testing which of these mechanisms applies is challenging. This holds particularly true for the discrimination mechanism as respondents would probably not simply admit to preferring the underrepresentation of migrants. To address this challenge, we conducted a survey experiment that allows us to test these three mechanisms.

The experiment is a ‘split ballot’ experiment, meaning that we randomly split the samples into a treatment and control group and ask both groups a similar but slightly different question. In this regard, the survey experiment is similar to early work on survey experiment (see, e.g., Cantril and Wilks 1940). In our experiment, the control group was asked how much they agree with the following statement: “Applicants in public service should be exclusively hired based on their professional skills and qualifications.” We refer to respondents who have seen this question as the control or baseline condition because the responses to this question indicate how strongly the respondents care about the merit principle. Respondents could express their support for this statement on a 11-point scale ranging from 0 (‘do not agree at all’) to 10 (‘fully agree’).

The treatment group received the exact same question but we added an ‘underrepresentation frame’ to the question text. Specifically, the question in the treatment question reads as follows: “Applicants in public service should be exclusively hired based on their professional skills and qualifications *even if this could lead to an underrepresentation of migrants in public service*” (emphasis added). Thus, we still ask for the support of the merit principle, but this time we state that mere support for the merit principle might

have an impact on the representativeness of bureaucracy.

3.4 Public Employment and Political Orientation

To analyze the effect of being a public sector employee a dummy variable is included that differentiates between the three samples. The samples of public administration students and of public administration employees are analyzed separately to measure effects regarding the duration of public sector experience. For easier interpretation both samples are referred to as ‘public samples’ whenever we consider it useful.

To elicit political orientation we utilize the standard question used in political science disciplines. It reads as follows: “Many people use the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ when talking about political attitudes. Where would you place yourself on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being ‘very left’ and 10 denoting ‘very right’ political attitudes?”. Low values therefore represent a left-leaning political orientation, while high values indicate rightist political attitudes.

4 Results

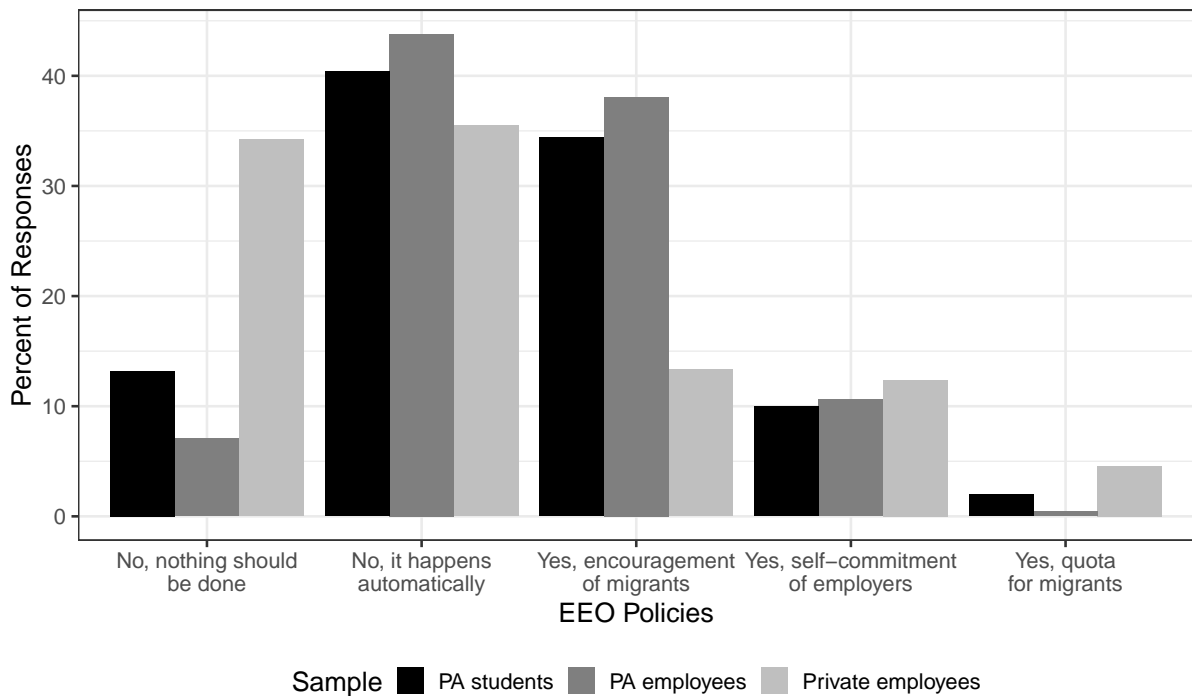
4.1 Results - Survey on Preferences for EEO Policies

Figure 2 shows the support for the EEO policy items. Most frequently among the PA students and PA employees the opposing item *Automatically* and the item *Encouragement* are chosen (also see Appendix Table A2). Both public groups prefer the opposing item *Nothing should be done* much less than private respondents. The two items that refer to the employer taking more action towards integrating migrants, *Quotas* and *Self-commitment*, reveal low levels of support by the public respondents as well. Among the private employees both opposing items *Nothing should be done* and *Automatically* are most supported, while all three supporting items are least preferred.

As the descriptive analysis shows, the item *Quota* is least supported by any of the respondents. In total numbers only $N = 38$ respondents chose this item, which is insufficient

to conduct multiple statistical analyses. We therefore removed this item from all further analyses. The distribution of the political orientation follows the typical pattern with highest levels around the mean value of 5 (scale ranges from 0 to 10). The three groups do not differ significantly in their mean values (see Appendix Table A2), ranging from 4.70 (PA Students) to 4.82 (PA Employees), but most PA Employees place themselves on the middle category while both other groups show few more variance.

Figure 2: Distribution of preferences for EEO policies

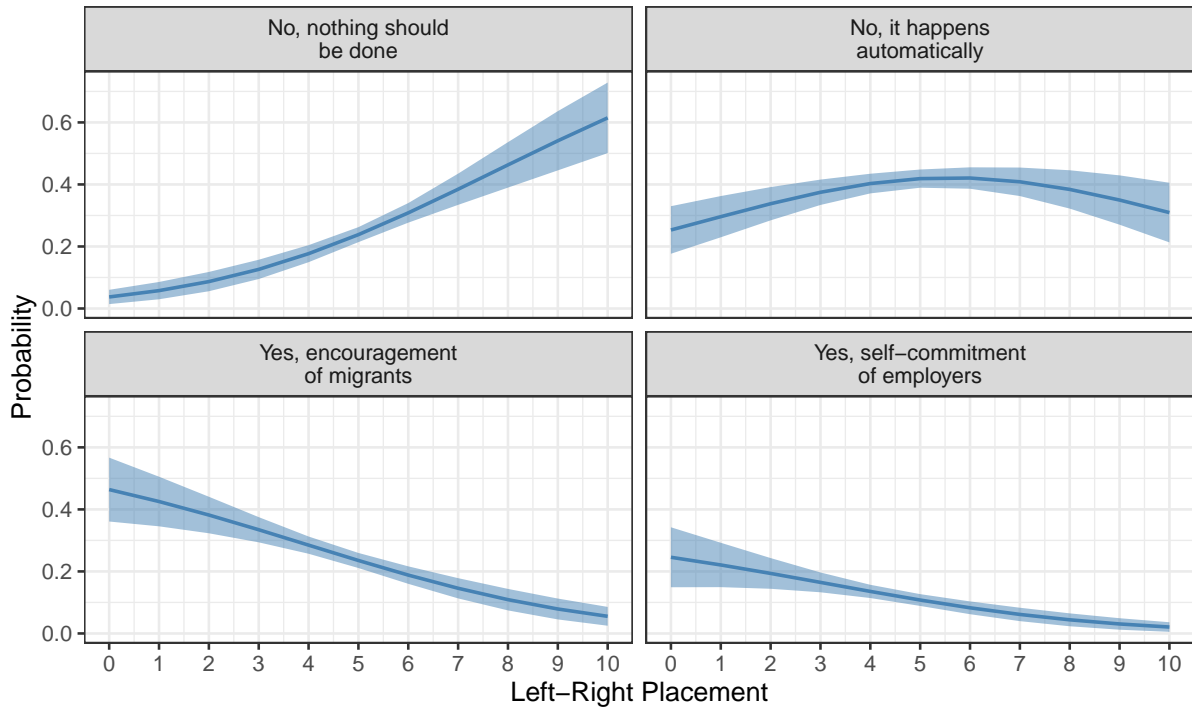


Note: Y-axis displays the proportion of respondents who have selected the answers displayed on the X-axis shows the five EEO policy items. Colors identify different samples.

We conduct a multinomial regression analysis including political orientation and working sector as explanatory and age and gender as control variables. In Figure 3 the effect of the political orientation on the preferences for EEO policies are graphically displayed for easier interpretation. In line with previous findings we find support for active EEO policies among individuals identifying with the political left. *Encouragement* and on a lower level *Self-commitment* reveal support among left-leaning respondents. The item *Automatically* shows strongest support by respondents self-sorting into the moderate po-

litical spectrum, while upright rejection of any EEO policy (*Nothing should be done*) is supported the more right-leaning respondents identify. Our expectation regarding the influence of the individual political attitudes (E1a) is therefore supported by our empirical findings.

Figure 3: Preferences for EEO policies by political orientation

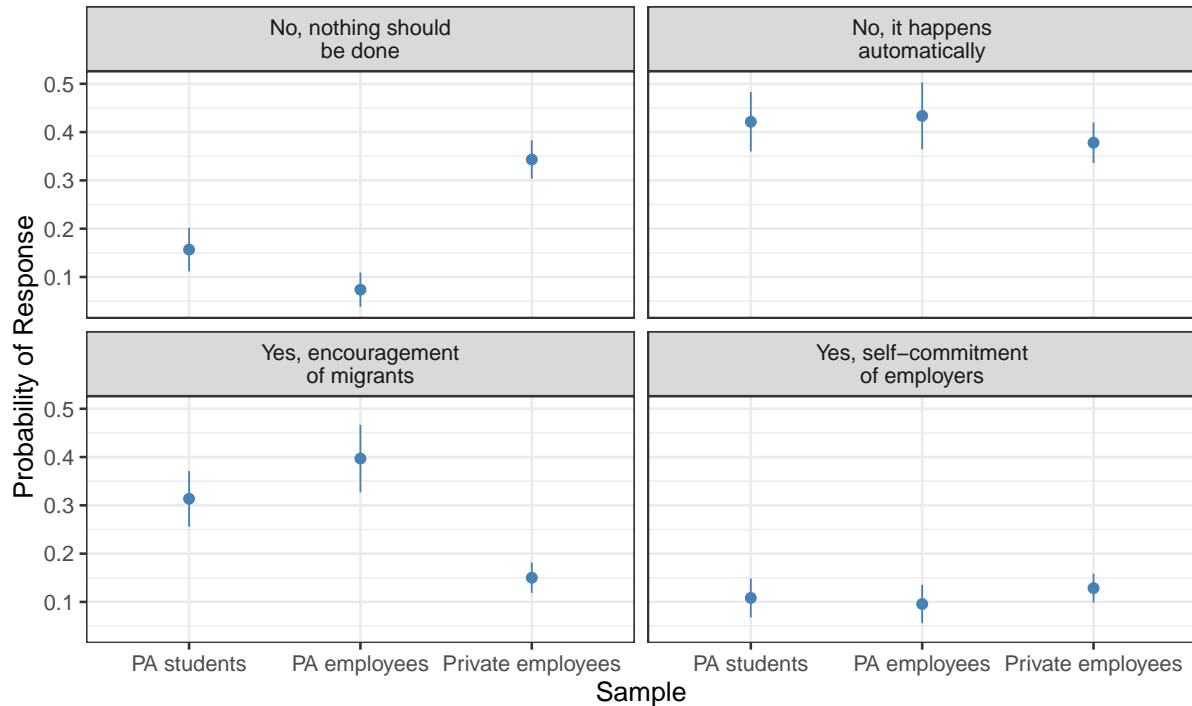


Note: Y-axis displays the probability to choose the respective item, X-axis shows the political orientation with low levels being left-leaning and high values being right-leaning. Each panel displays one of the four EEO policy items.

The effect of working in the public sector on the preference for EEO policies is given in Figure 4 as predicted values. The figure refines what the descriptive analysis has shown. Public administration students and employees prefer *Nothing should be done* significantly less than the private employees, but there is no sample specific difference on the other opposing item *Automatically*. Both PA samples, in contrast, support *Encouragement* significantly stronger than the private sample. Again according to our descriptive findings, sample specific differences on the item *Self-commitment* are not measured. We conclude from these findings that both public administration samples are less likely to openly oppose EEO policies (*Nothing should be done*), but are more likely to support active

EEO policies, i.e. *Encouragement*. Thus, our expectation with regard to the respondents' affiliation to the public sector (E2a) is therefore supported by our findings.

Figure 4: Preferences for EEO policies by public sector work

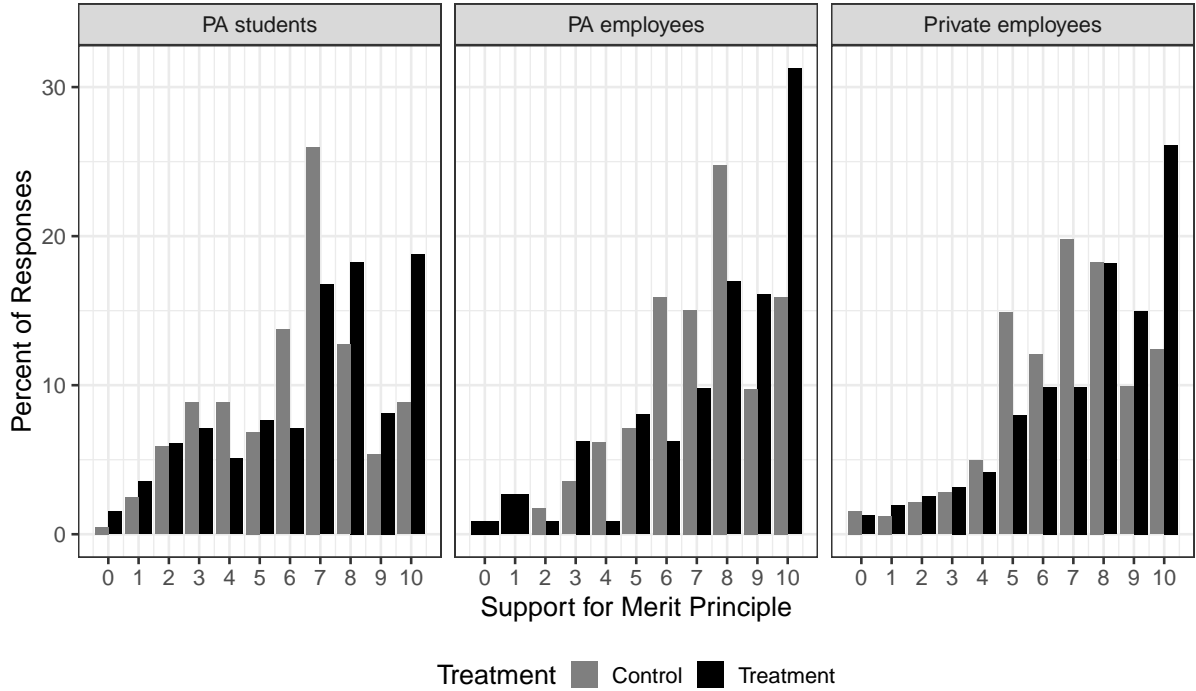


Note: Y-axis displays the probability to choose the respective item, X-axis denotes the sample. Each panel displays one of the four EEO policy items. The item *Quota* is removed from analysis due to the very low number of responses ($N = 38$).

4.2 Results - Survey Experiment on the Tension between Merit and Representation

Figure 5 shows the distribution of responses in the survey experiment. The y-axis on the displays the relative share of responses, while X-axis denotes the level of support for the merit principle. Each panel displays one of the three groups of respondents. As we can see do all groups show a peak around supporting the merit principle with 7 out of 10 in the baseline condition. Adding the underrepresentation frame, however, leads to a shift of the pattern towards around 8 to 9 out of 10. Particularly among the PA and the private employee samples highest levels of support (10 out of 10) can be found under

Figure 5: Treatment effect by public sector work



Note: Y-axis displays the relative share of responses, X-axis denotes the level of support for the merit principle. Each panel displays one of the three groups of respondents.

the treatment condition. Thus, the treatment effect is not driven by a linear shift of the mean value of support for the merit principle, but rather by a significant impact on the response pattern among a large share of respondents.

In Table 1 the results of the multiple OLS-regression with robust standard errors on the support for the merit hiring principle are presented. As can be seen from Model 1 in Table 1, the unconditional treatment effect (τ) for the full sample equals 0.593 and is statistically significant. This finding indicates that, averaged over the full sample, the framing of a potential underrepresentation of migrants leads respondents to show higher levels of support for the merit principle. Model 1 further shows, that a more rightist political orientation leads to higher support for the merit principle, as well as being a public or a private employee compared to being a PA student. In the following the conditional effects of the political orientation and the working sector affiliation on the support for the merit principle are presented.

First, we have interacted the treatment indicator with the respondent’s political orientation. Model 2 in Table 1 displays the results of this interaction. In Figure 6 these effects are visualized for easier interpretation. Panel A in Figure 6 displays the predicted values for the support of the merit principle conditional on the political orientation. The two graphs in Panel A reveal the support for each treatment condition. The support is not conditioned by the individual’s political orientation in the baseline condition, while support increases in the treatment condition the more right respondents identify. This treatment effect is significant as the average marginal effects plot in Panel B of Figure 6 shows.

Moreover, the interaction predicts only a small negative effect for very left-wing respondents. However, including a squared term for the political orientation in order to control for potential non-linearities in the effect moderation, we observe that the negative treatment effect for left-wing respondents vanishes while the positive treatment effect for right-wing respondents remains (see Model 3 in Table 1 and Panels C and D in Figure 6). The results therefore confirm our expectation *E1b* that the stronger respondents identify with the political right the more positive the treatment effect is, i.e. rightist respondents overemphasize support for the merit principle under the underrepresentation frame.

This finding is widely in line with findings of Kuklinski et al. (1997) who find that anger against affirmative action is partially due to racial prejudice (Kuklinski et al., 1997). Our findings, however, enrich the picture drawn from those insights. Hence, our findings show that right-wing respondents are most strongly opposing EEO policies (see Results from the survey on Preferences for EEO policies) and they also perceive a tension between the merit-principle and demands for representation of migrants, which might contribute an explanation for the underlying mechanisms. Our findings, however, are not in line with the findings of Gilens, Sniderman and Kuklinski (1998) who find opposition against affirmative action on the same levels throughout the political spectrum and regardless of the commitment to racial harmony. Instead, we find this opposition predominantly among right-wing respondents which in the German context also includes an animus

against migrants.

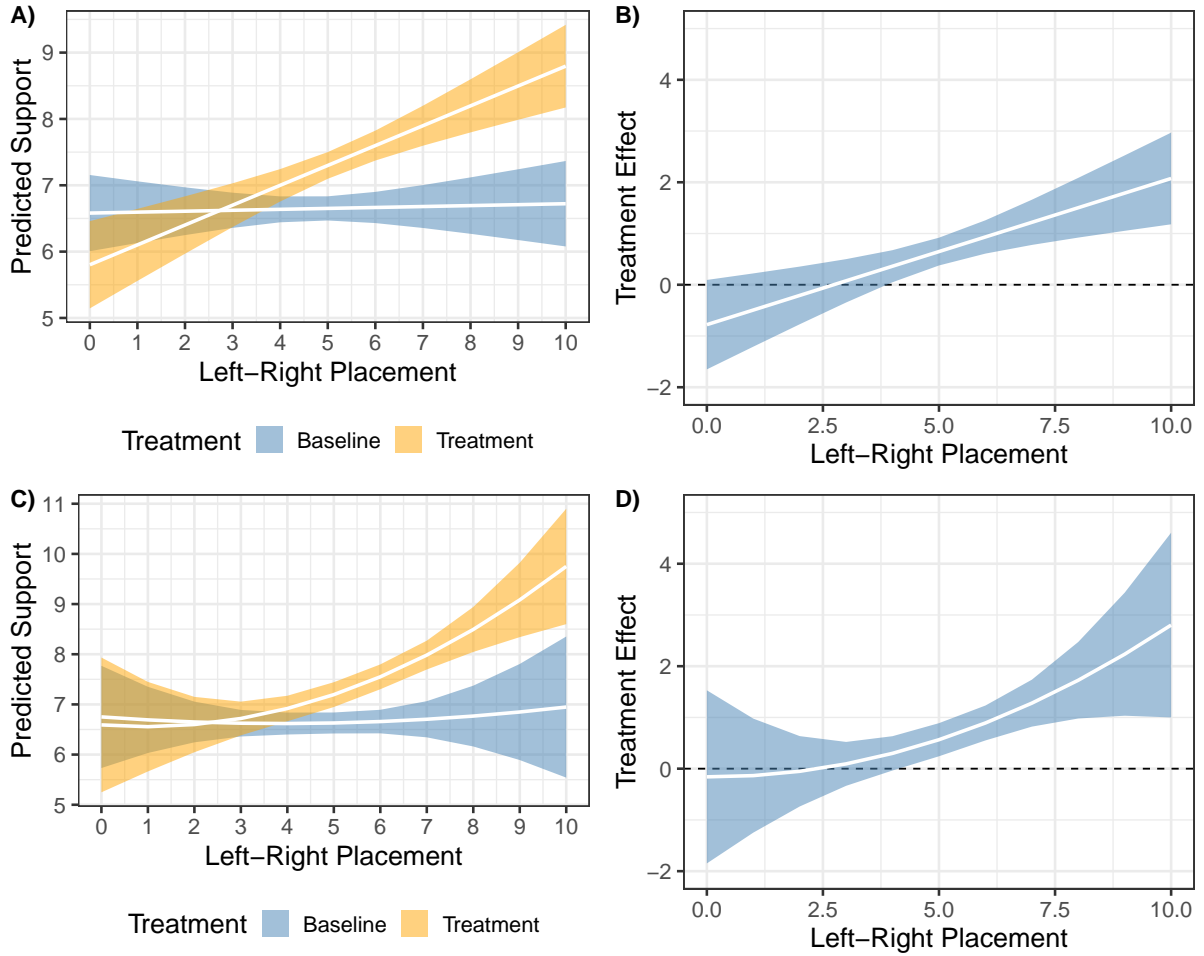
Table 1: Results of the Survey Experiment

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Dep. Var. = Support for Merit Principle			
Treatment	0.593*** [0.14]	-0.779* [0.44]	-0.159 [0.86]	0.475* [0.26]
Political Orientation	0.157*** [0.04]	0.0141 [0.06]	-0.0681 [0.22]	0.156*** [0.04]
PA Employees	0.869*** [0.24]	0.848*** [0.24]	0.869*** [0.24]	0.894*** [0.30]
Private Employees	0.592*** [0.20]	0.576*** [0.20]	0.565*** [0.20]	0.464* [0.25]
Age	0.00392 [0.01]	0.00391 [0.01]	0.00336 [0.01]	0.00398 [0.01]
Female	-0.430*** [0.14]	-0.419*** [0.14]	-0.406*** [0.14]	-0.435*** [0.14]
Treatment × Political Orientation		0.285*** [0.09]	-0.00628 [0.35]	
Political Orientation × Political Orientation			0.00877 [0.02]	
Treatment × Political Orientation × Political Orientation			0.0303 [0.03]	
Treatment × PA Employees				-0.0566 [0.41]
Treatment × Private Employees				0.255 [0.32]
Constant	5.544*** [0.31]	6.226*** [0.37]	6.410*** [0.55]	5.608*** [0.33]
Observations	1209	1209	1209	1209
R^2	0.061	0.070	0.072	0.062
Adjusted R^2	0.056	0.064	0.065	0.055

Note: OLS regression, Robust standard errors in brackets, * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$, Reference category sample = PA students.

Second, to analyze how the working sector affiliation conditions the support for the merit principle the results from interacting the treatment variable with the subject pool are presented in Model 4 of Table 1 and graphically provided in Figure 7. Panel A of Figure 7 shows the predicted values of both treatment conditions on the support for the merit principle for all three respondent samples. According to the regression results in Model

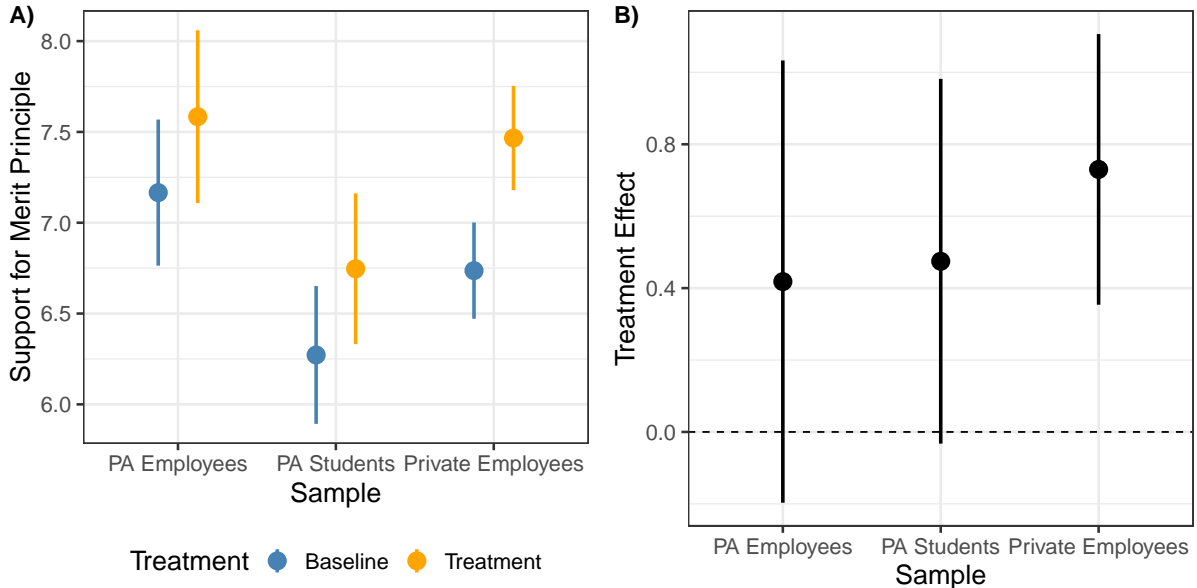
Figure 6: Experimental Outcome Conditional on Political Orientation



Note: Left panel plots treatment effect conditional on linear effect moderation of the left-right scale. Right panel plots treatment effect conditional on squared effect moderation of the left-right scale. Visualization is based on models (3) and (4) from Table 1. Shaded area denote 95% confidence intervals.

1, we find the PA students revealing lowest levels of support for the merit principle under each treatment condition. Although the private employees show the strongest treatment effect, the differences between the three samples are statistically insignificant (see Panel B in Figure 7). We conclude from that, that being engaged in public sector work does not shape whether a tension between the merit principle and representation is perceived. Our expectation *E2b* therefore is not supported.

Figure 7: Experimental Outcome Conditional on Sector Employment



Note: Vertical lines denote 95% confidence intervals.

4.3 Probing Deeper - Preferences for EEO Policies and the Tension between Merit and Representation

As shown in the first part of this study, EEO policies are often controversial with some people supporting them and others being fundamentally opposed to their implementation. More specifically, we demonstrated that the support for EEO policies is largely influenced by the political orientation of a respondent and that different patterns of support for EEO policies can be found among public and private employees, with public employees being less likely to oppose EEO policies and being more likely to support active *Encouragement* of migrants for public sector positions.

In this part of the study we aim to explore whether the preference for EEO policies reveal explanatory power for answering the question who perceives a tension between merit based public hiring and bureaucratic representation. We can think of several angles the individual preferences for EEO policies might shape the perceived tension. If individuals strongly support EEO policies they are very likely to hold a preference for a representative workforce. Framing a potential underrepresentation in the experimental treatment could

therefore lead to a negative value of τ , meaning less support for the merit principle in the treatment condition. However, usually EEO policy supporters do not believe that EEO policies lead to selecting less qualified employees, why the treatment effect could also be zero among EEO policy supporters, i.e. $\tau = 0$. In this case they do not perceive any tension between the principles. In contrast, opponents of EEO policies might only be concerned about the merit principle and therefore unconditionally support it, why these respondents do not show a treatment effect either. But opponents of EEO policies could, alike right-wing individuals, also have a preference for underrepresentation, why they should show a positive treatment effect with $\tau > 0$.

The results of the regression analysis are displayed in Table 2 with the EEO policies as explanatory variables in Model 1. The interaction effects based on Model 2 are visualized in Figure 8. As can be seen, the treatment effects are in fact strongly heterogeneous and are shaped by the respondent's attitudes towards EEO policies. Among the opponents of EEO policies (items *Nothing should be done* and *Automatically*) we find a strong increase in the level of support for the merit principle in the treatment condition. The effect is stronger among opponents who simply say that no EEO policies should be employed without arguing that the underrepresentation will disappear on its own. Within the group of EEO policies supporters (items *Encouragement* and *Self-commitment*) we can also observe effect heterogeneity but for these groups the treatment effects are negative. Those who support the *Encouragement* of migrants to apply for jobs in the public sector – a rather weak form of EEO policies – show a negligible treatment effect which is very close to zero. In contrast, those who favor a *Self-commitment* of public employers to hire more migrants show a tendency of significantly lowering their support for the merit principle in the treatment condition.

Thus, our results find support for all expected mechanisms. We find that opponents of EEO policies simply seem to actually have a preference for the underrepresentation of migrants, rather than being unconditionally in favor of the merit principle (which would have indicated a zero treatment effect among opponents of EEO policies). But we find also

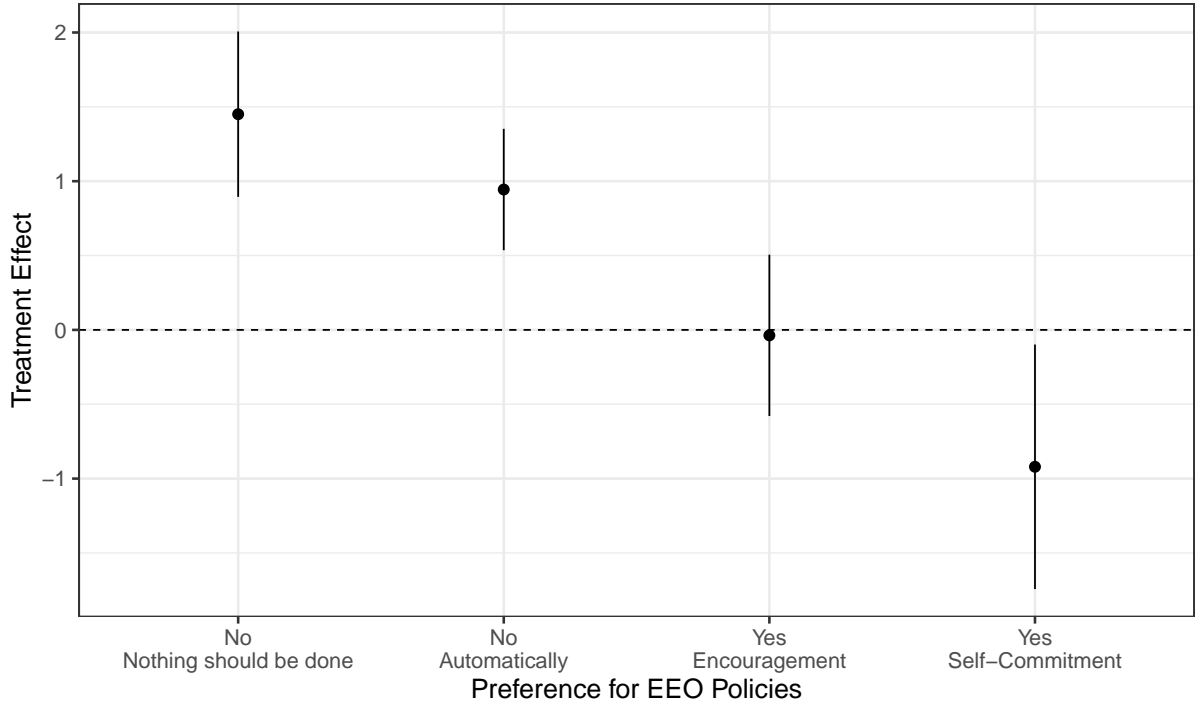
Table 2: Results of the Survey Experiment - Effect of EEO Policies

	(1)	(2)
	Dep. Var. = Support for Merit Principle	
Treatment	0.594*** [0.14]	1.456*** [0.28]
Automatically	-0.157 [0.18]	0.105 [0.25]
Encouragement	-0.397* [0.20]	0.312 [0.27]
Self-commitment	-1.081*** [0.26]	0.0622 [0.33]
Age	0.0186*** [0.01]	0.0180*** [0.01]
Female	-0.505*** [0.14]	-0.525*** [0.14]
Treatment \times Automatically		-0.544 [0.35]
Treatment \times Encouragement		-1.453*** [0.40]
Treatment \times Self-commitment		-2.420*** [0.51]
Constant	6.549*** [0.29]	6.159*** [0.31]
Observations	1220	1220
R^2	0.056	0.080
Adjusted R^2	0.052	0.074

Note: OLS regression, Robust standard errors in brackets, * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$, The item *Quota* is removed from analysis due to the very low number of responses ($N = 38$). Reference category EEO policy = *Nothing should be done*.

some evidence for the claim that supporters of EEO policies might be willing to decrease their support for the merit principle when it comes at the cost of a underrepresentation. While this is not the case for all groups of EEO policies supporters, we find this pattern for those who favor that the public service commits itself to hiring more migrants.

Figure 8: Treatment Effect Conditional on Preference for EEO Policies



Note: Based on Model (2) from Table 2. Vertical lines denote 95% confidence intervals.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, we addressed two questions regarding hiring preferences in public service. We first ask who supports or opposes active EEO policies and second, we analyze which factors lead to perceiving a trade-off between the two major hiring paradigms - merit and representation. This work contributes to the debate about the common critique against EEO policies in the public hiring process that EEO policies are likely to undermine the merit principle and lowers the quality of public personnel (see e.g. [Kranz, 1974](#)). In this study we explore how both attitudes can be explained by the individual political orientation and the working sector affiliation. We employ a two-step research design on three different samples of respondents: public administration students, public administration employees and private employees. All of those respondents reveal relevant working experience in their respective working sector.

First, we conduct a survey asking for the preferences for various EEO policy measures.

Our findings support our expectations and can be summarized in two points: First, we find that the stronger respondents identify with the political right the more they openly oppose EEO policies. Second, both public administration samples are more likely to support active EEO policies, namely to encourage migrants to apply for public service positions. In contrast, the private employee sample significantly stronger opposes EEO policies, by confirming that nothing should be done to increase the share of migrants in public service.

In the second part of this study we conduct a randomized split-ballot survey experiment to find out who perceives a tension between the merit-based hiring principle and migrant representation in public service. Therefore we measure the level of support for merit hiring in public service in the baseline condition. In the treatment condition, we use the same statement, but add that merit based hiring might lead to an underrepresentation of migrants. The difference in the support for each of the statements informs us about whether a potential trade-off between merit and representation is perceived. We find that, first, the general framing of a potential underrepresentation increases the support for the merit principle. Second, we find that being more right-leaning leads them to overemphasize the support for merit recruitment and migrant underrepresentation is mentioned. We suppose, that right-wing respondents evaluate both, merit recruitment and migrant underrepresentation positively, why we find this positive treatment effect. We further find, that left-leaning respondents, however, do not show a treatment effect, which also means that they are not likely to give up on the merit principle. Third and last, in contrast to our expectation we do not find a difference in the treatment effect between public and private respondents. This means, that perceiving a tension between merit and representation is a pattern across both working sectors.

More generally, our results contribute not only to the emerging field of behavioral public administration research. They also provide insights why public debates about EEO policies are particularly controversial and heated. As we demonstrate with regard to the bureaucratic representation of migrants, these debates are driven by political attitudes. A

related and also frequently debated issue is the representation of women. Our experiment could be easily replicated for the case of female representation in the bureaucracy. It remains an open question whether similar effects can be found for this case or whether EEO policies for these groups are less controversial.

Notes

¹All variables are described in Appendix Table A2.

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Appendix

A Preference for EEO Policies

Table A1: (How) Should the share of migrants in the public sector be increased?

	<i>Dep. Var.</i> = How should the share of migrants in the public sector be increased?			
	PA students	PA employees	Private employees	Full Sample
Nothing should be done				
Political orientation	0.646*** [0.16]	0.385 [0.34]	0.501*** [0.10]	0.553*** [0.08]
Age	-0.0700* [0.04]	-0.0533* [0.03]	0.0193 [0.01]	0.00341 [0.01]
Female	-1.144** [0.47]	-1.853** [0.90]	0.314 [0.27]	-0.124 [0.22]
PA employees				-0.695 [0.47]
Private employees				0.739** [0.34]
Constant	-0.589 [1.26]	0.770 [2.31]	-2.408*** [0.75]	-2.463*** [0.54]
Automatically				
Political orientation	0.369*** [0.11]	0.538*** [0.19]	0.169** [0.09]	0.259*** [0.06]
Age	-0.0599* [0.03]	-0.0268 [0.02]	0.0101 [0.01]	-0.00352 [0.01]
Female	-0.147 [0.38]	-0.405 [0.50]	0.137 [0.26]	0.0182 [0.20]
PA employees				0.127 [0.36]
Private employees				-0.227 [0.30]
Constant	1.253 [0.92]	0.345 [1.48]	-0.191 [0.67]	0.276 [0.42]
Encouragement				
Political orientation	0.0850 [0.10]	0.216 [0.18]	-0.0607 [0.10]	0.00405 [0.07]
Age	-0.0794** [0.04]	-0.0273 [0.02]	-0.00291 [0.01]	-0.0116 [0.01]
Female	-0.0664 [0.38]	-0.0913 [0.50]	0.395 [0.32]	0.258 [0.21]
PA employees				0.364 [0.37]
Private employees				-0.917*** [0.33]
Constant	2.797** [1.10]	1.627 [1.43]	0.241 [0.79]	1.318*** [0.45]
Observations	393	207	608	1208
<i>AIC</i>	940.0	479.8	1501.3	2916.8
<i>BIC</i>	987.7	519.8	1554.3	3008.5

Note: Multinomial Logit Regression, Standard errors in brackets, * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$, TThe item *Quota* is removed from analysis due to the very low number of responses ($N = 38$).

B Definition of Variables

Table A2: Definition of variables

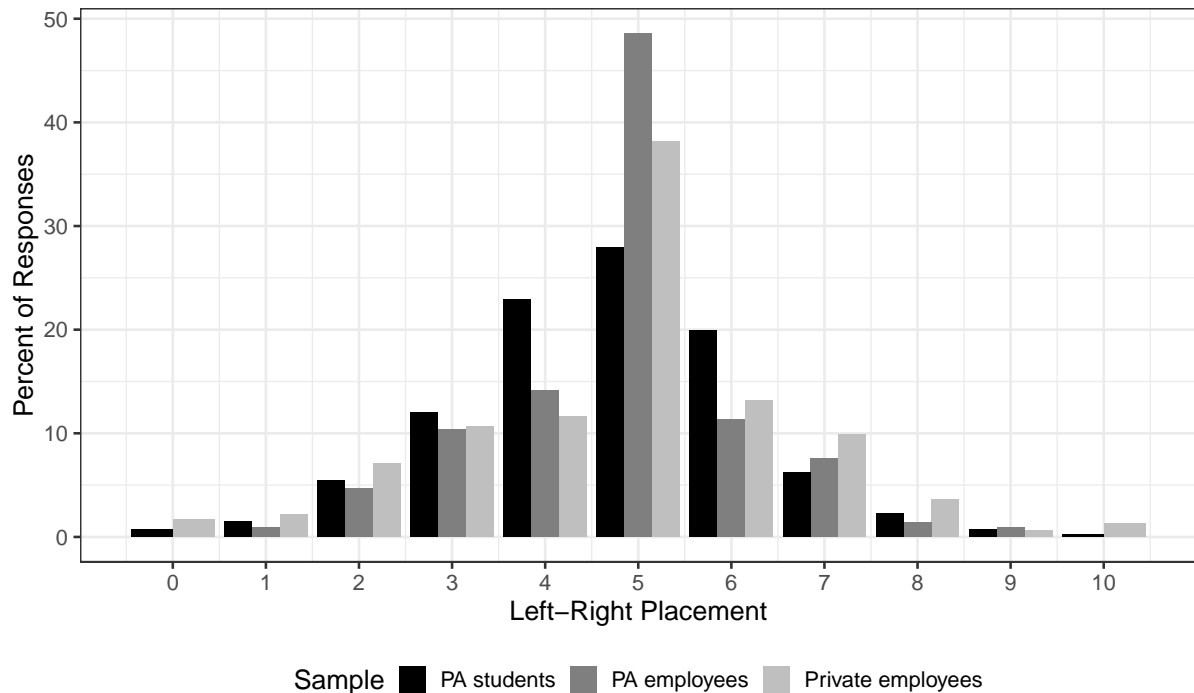
Variable	Item/Definition
<i>Study 1: Preferences for EEO policies</i>	
Nothing should be done	“In your opinion, should there be measures to increase the amount of people with immigrant backgrounds in public service? Which of these statements do you agree with?” (Single choice) “No, it is not necessary to increase the amount of people with immigrant backgrounds in public service.”
Automatically	“No, nothing needs to be done to increase the amount of people with immigrant backgrounds in public service, it will happen automatically.”
Encouragement	“Yes, by supporting people with migration backgrounds in the application process for positions in public service.”
Self-Commitment	“Yes, public service employers should voluntarily oblige themselves to hire more people with immigrant backgrounds.”
Quota	“Yes, by legally obliging employers in public service to hire a certain quota of people with immigrant backgrounds.”
<i>Study 2: Tension between merit and representation</i>	
Treatment	0 - Baseline statement, 1 - Treatment condition “How do you feel about the following statement?” (Slider 0-10, 0- fully disagree to 10- fully agree) <i>Baseline statement</i> “Workers in public service should be hired exclusively based on their professional skills and qualifications.” <i>Treatment condition</i> “Workers in public service should be exclusively hired based on their professional skills and qualifications, even if it could lead to those with immigrant backgrounds to be underrepresented in public service.”
<i>Explanatory variables</i>	
Political orientation	“Many people use the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ when talking about political attitudes. Where would you place yourself on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being ‘very left’ and 10 denoting ‘very right’ political attitudes?” (Slider 0-10)
Working sector affiliation	1- Public administration students (PA students) 2- Public administration employees (PA employees) 3- Private Employees (1 and 2 also referred to as public employees)
<i>Control variables</i>	
Age	In years
Female	0 - Male, 1 - Female

C Descriptive Statistics by Sample

Table A3: Descriptive statistics by sample

	PA Students		PA Employees		Private Employees	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Age	23.42	4.69	42.67	13.14	41.80	10.51
Female	0.62	0.49	0.39	0.49	0.52	0.50
Political orientation	4.70	1.54	4.82	1.34	4.81	1.79
EEO Nothing should be done	0.13	0.34	0.07	0.26	0.34	0.47
EEO Automatically	0.40	0.49	0.44	0.50	0.35	0.48
EEO Encouragement	0.34	0.48	0.38	0.49	0.13	0.34
EEO Self-Commitment	0.10	0.30	0.11	0.31	0.12	0.33
EEO Quota	0.02	0.14	0.00	0.07	0.05	0.21
Treatment effect	6.37	2.58	7.43	2.29	7.10	2.39
N	401		228		637	

Figure A1: Distribution of Left-Right-Placement by Sample



Note: Y-axis displays the share of respondents. X-axis denotes the placement on the left-right scale where 0 denotes ‘very left’ and 10 ‘very right’.