

Race, bureaucracy, and symbolic representation: Interactions between citizens and police.

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Race, Bureaucracy, and Symbolic Representation: Interactions between Citizens and Police

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Abstract

Our understanding of representation by government employees has increased considerably in the past 30 years. Scholars have found that represented groups benefit from representative bureaucracies and conclude that this benefit is a function of active representation. However, due to the aggregate unit of observation used in most of these studies and the outcome measures that are typically used as dependent variables, we argue that there are other forms of representation that can explain these findings. We contribute to the existing research in this area by focusing on symbolic representation and conduct our test using individual-level data from a national police-citizen contact survey. We hypothesize that citizen perceptions of legitimacy regarding police actions are shaped by the interaction of citizen race and officer race. Our results suggest that symbolic representation does occur—blacks are more likely to perceive police actions as being legitimate if there are black officers present. Additionally, whites are more likely to perceive police actions as legitimate if the actions were conducted by white officers.

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