

# Judging the Paper by Its Cover: Affiliation Bias in Conference Admissions

Giacomo Gallegati (r) Luca Favero (r) **Águeda Solís Alonso** (r) Enrique Carreras

EEA Congress  
25 - 28 August 2025

# Motivation



**Jennifer Doleac** ✓  
@jenniferdoleac

Absolutely. Can distinctly remember meetings at conferences that resulted in coauthorships, **funding, & media coverage** of my work. And even if I couldn't, I'm confident that knowing more people in the field led to more seminar invites, citations, etc. Networks are super important!

10:01 PM · Jul 5, 2023 · 2,187 Views



**Ben Harrell** @elben · Jul 5, 2023

Quite simply, without having attended the 2019 ASSA meeting in Atlanta, I would not have had my past job, my current job, nor would I still be an academic economist.



**Dr. Isabel Z. Martínez** # [ ] @IZMartinez86 · Jul 6, 2023

Early **feedback (from potential referees and editors)**

Seminar invitations

**Citations**

Visibility

Collaborations



161



**David Schindler**  
@DSchindlerEcon

I **met my coauthor** for what would become my job market paper at a conference. Without going to that conference, I might not even have stayed in academia...

6:03 PM · Jul 6, 2023 · 160 Views



**Ludovica Gazzè** @LudoGazze · Jul 5, 2023

As many others in replies: yes. Met coauthors **@ClaudiaLPersico** & **@lorenz\_06** at conferences/workshop (the latter online, when I forced myself to email at least one person per day attended).

I'm pretty certain I got **seminar invites** b/c conference presentations.

The list goes on...



702



**Ron Davies** @ron\_b\_davies · Jul 7, 2023

Undoubtedly. Coauthorships, joint grant applications, **tips on future post-docs**, ideas for papers, and a chain of events that led to my current job: all had their genesis in a conference.



119



# Motivation

- ▶ Conferences and **networks** are key for academic career advancement
  - ▶ Increase likelihood of being cited (De Leon and McQuillin, 2020)
  - ▶ Main source of meritocracy bias in AEA-EEA-ES-RES report (Altonji et al., 2025)
- ▶ Admission is based on **peer review**, which is subject to **biases**.
  - ▶ Gender (Card et al. 2020; 2022), seniority (Uchida, 2021), ethnicity (Pleskac et al., 2024), nationality (Tavoletti et al., 2022), prominence (Huber et al., 2022) and beauty (Hale et al., 2023)
- ▶ Biases in peer review **reinforce disadvantages**, hamper diversity and meritocracy, damaging research quality (Freeman and Huang, 2015)
- ▶ **University of affiliation** is one of the most salient **signals** in Economics (Freeman et al. 2024)

## This paper

- ▶ Investigates how **affiliation** can **bias** the evaluation of research and ultimately shape conference composition

## This paper

- ▶ Investigates how **affiliation** can **bias** the evaluation of research and ultimately shape conference composition
- ▶ Runs a **matched-pair field experiment** during the reviewing phase of an early career workshop in Economics

## This paper

- ▶ Investigates how **affiliation** can **bias** the evaluation of research and ultimately shape conference composition
- ▶ Runs a **matched-pair field experiment** during the reviewing phase of an early career workshop in Economics
- ▶ Documents a substantial **bias** in favor of papers coming from **prestigious institutions**, which decreases the representation of non-top departments, females and first-gens in conferences

## This paper

- ▶ Investigates how **affiliation** can **bias** the evaluation of research and ultimately shape conference composition
- ▶ Runs a **matched-pair field experiment** during the reviewing phase of an early career workshop in Economics
- ▶ Documents a substantial **bias** in favor of papers coming from **prestigious institutions**, which decreases the representation of non-top departments, females and first-gens in conferences
- ▶ Finds evidence of **in-group** bias, compatible with both statistical and taste-based discrimination

## Related literature and contributions

### **Cognitive biases in the evaluation of research**

Researchers from top universities get an advantage from displaying their affiliation (Blank, 1991; Ersoy and Pate 2023; Pleskac et al., 2024; Uchida, 2024)

- ▶ First paper to study *affiliation bias* in Economics conferences
- ▶ First study focusing on early-career researchers
- ▶ Experimental design allows to isolate effect of affiliation from other signals like authors' prominence, seniority, gender, etc.

### **Fairness in academia**

Top departments are less diverse in terms of gender and socioeconomic background (Schultz and Stanbury, 2022). Part of the gender gap in publications is due to this (Ersoy and Pate, 2023)

- ▶ Study the impact of affiliation bias on conference composition

# Experimental Design



Selective reviewers

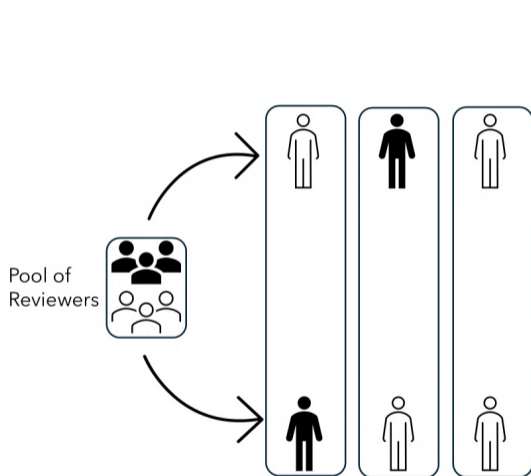


Non-selective reviewers

Pool of Reviewers



# Experimental Design

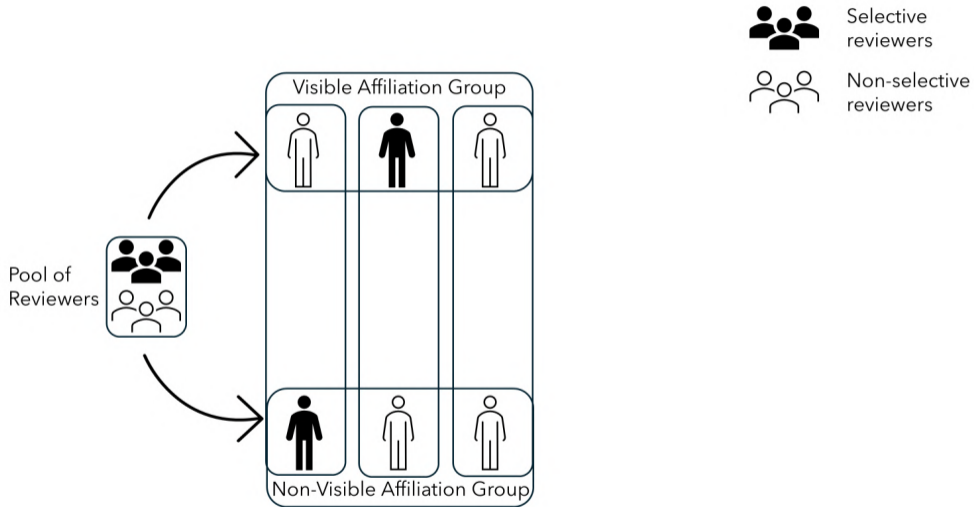


Selective reviewers

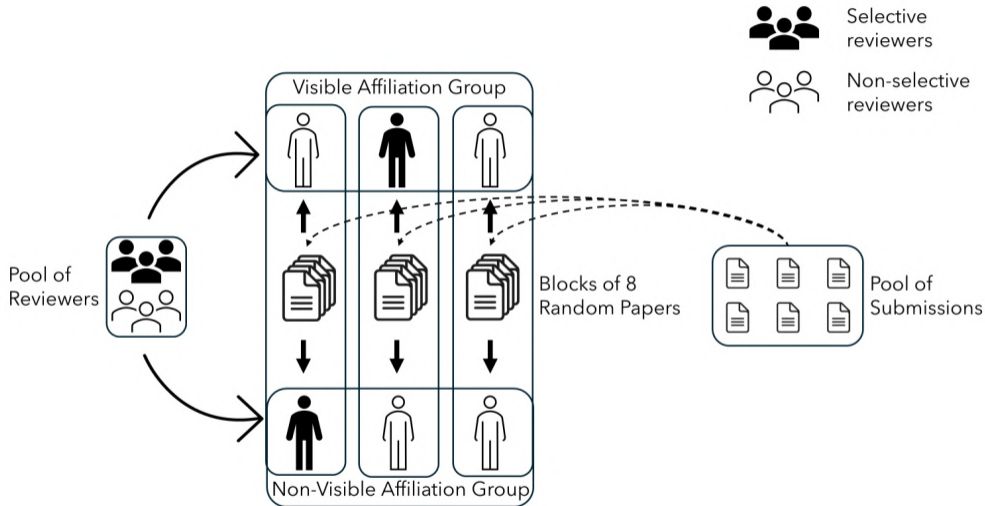


Non-selective reviewers

# Experimental Design



# Experimental Design



# Experimental Design

University of Turin and Collegio Carlo Alberto

23<sup>rd</sup> October 2024

**Keywords:** affiliation, bias, peer-review, conferences, early-career  
**JEL codes:** A1, D8, I2, J71, C93

Building and maintaining a network with peers and senior researchers is a key element in young researchers' career development. (Factor et al. [2014] [Frugania et al. 2022]). Academic conferences are particularly suited to this end, as they allow for interaction and exchange of feedback and ideas, and are particularly relevant for early career researchers who just started building their network (Campan et al. [2018], Leite Lopez de Leon and McQuinn [2020], Giordolichenko et al. [2021]).

As conferences' admissions are mostly based on peer review, this process should be free from biases, which can otherwise have severe and unfair effects on the careers of scholars. However, multiple papers show how various personal characteristics and labels may influence assessments of research. In particular, previous research has found that gender (Espino and Nunez [2023], Samalita and Devereux [2024], Carl et al. [2024] [2022]), seniority (Sveeter and Bascelli [2017], Uchida [2023]), nationality (Tavoletti et al. [2022]), physical appearance (Hale et al. [2022]), author's prominence (Huber et al. [2022] [Tomkings et al. 2017]) and affiliation (Esroy and Paté [2023], Hwang [2001], Li et al. [2022]) play a role on how scholarly work is assessed. These biases, in turn, can unfairly affect the careers and opportunities of researchers.

In this paper, we conduct a field experiment to explore the role of affiliation biases in the peer review process of an early career workshop in Economics taking place at a French university. Our study contributes to the ongoing debate on fairness and cognitive biases across review stages in academia. We focus on Economics, a field with a larger "publication gap" between top and lower-ranked institutions (Ferreiro et al. [2019]).

We designed and implemented a field experiment during autumn 2023, leveraging the application and review phases of the PhD Workshop in Networks and Political Economy at University Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne. This conference invited submissions of extended abstracts from PhD candidates and postdocs, focusing on political economy but welcoming submissions from all fields

(a) Visible Affiliation

University of Turin and Collegio Carlo Alberto

23<sup>rd</sup> October 2024

**Keywords:** affiliation, bias, peer-review, conferences, early-career  
**JEL codes:** A1, D8, I2, J71, C93

Building and maintaining a network with peers and senior researchers is a key element in young researchers' career development. (Factor et al. [2014] [Frugania et al. 2022]). Academic conferences are particularly suited to this end, as they allow for interaction and exchange of feedback and ideas, and are particularly relevant for early career researchers who just started building their network (Campan et al. [2018], Leite Lopez de Leon and McQuinn [2020], Giordolichenko et al. [2021]).

As conferences' admissions are mostly based on peer review, this process should be free from biases, which can otherwise have severe and unfair effects on the careers of scholars. However, multiple papers show how various personal characteristics and labels may influence assessments of research. In particular, previous research has found that gender (Espino and Nunez [2023], Samalita and Devereux [2024], Carl et al. [2024] [2022]), seniority (Sveeter and Bascelli [2017], Uchida [2023]), nationality (Tavoletti et al. [2022]), physical appearance (Hale et al. [2022]), author's prominence (Huber et al. [2022] [Tomkings et al. 2017]) and affiliation (Esroy and Paté [2023], Hwang [2001], Li et al. [2022]) play a role on how scholarly work is assessed. These biases, in turn, can unfairly affect the careers and opportunities of researchers.

In this paper, we conduct a field experiment to explore the role of affiliation biases in the peer review process of an early career workshop in Economics taking place at a French university. Our study contributes to the ongoing debate on fairness and cognitive biases across review stages in academia. We focus on Economics, a field with a larger "publication gap" between top and lower-ranked institutions (Ferreiro et al. [2019]).

We designed and implemented a field experiment during autumn 2023, leveraging the application and review phases of the PhD Workshop in Networks and Political Economy at University Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne. This conference invited submissions of extended abstracts from PhD candidates and postdocs, focusing on political economy but welcoming submissions from all fields

(b) Non-Visible Affiliation

# Data

- ▶ **Overall Score**
  - ▶ Grades (1-10): Research question, research design, and writing.
- ▶ Position in the Overall Score **ranking**
  - ▶ Acceptance into the conference
- ▶ **Suggestion** for acceptance (Definitely, Probably, Maybe, No)
- ▶ **Perceived institutional quality**
- ▶ Individual characteristics
- ▶ 156 applicants
  - ▶ 58 from selective and 98 from non selective institutions
  - ▶ 140 completed peer-review (89.7% response rate)
  - ▶ 1,120 reviews, 7 reviews per paper on average

[More data](#)

[List of selective institutions](#)

# Empirical Strategy

## Model Specification:

$$Y_{ijb} = \alpha + \beta_1 VA_j + \beta_2 (VA_j \times Top75_i) + \beta_3' X_j + \gamma_{ib} + u_{ijb} \quad (1)$$

## Key Variables:

- ▶  $Y_{ijb}$ : Outcome for paper  $i$ , read by reviewer  $j$  in block  $b$ .
- ▶  $VA_j$ : Visible affiliation dummy.
- ▶  $Top75_i$ : Top 75 institution dummy.
- ▶  $\beta_2$ : Coefficient for affiliation bias.

**Controls:** Reviewer characteristics, paper-by-block FEs, SEs clustered by reviewers' institution.

Choice Top75

Balance checks

# Results

- ▶ Main outcomes [link](#)
- ▶ Acceptance premium by acceptance rate [link](#)
- ▶ Conference composition by acceptance rate [link](#)
- ▶ Quality of selected papers [link](#)
- ▶ Heterogeneity by reviewer type [link](#)

## Robustness checks

- ▶ Controls and alternative Fixed Effects [link](#)
- ▶ Multiple Hypothesis Correction [link](#)
- ▶ Choice of cutoff for defining “Top” institutions [link](#)
- ▶ Dropping online papers/ Affiliation salience and EDE [link](#)
- ▶ Use of alternative rankings [link](#)

## Statistical vs. taste-based discrimination

- ▶ Statistical discrimination: reviewers believe that on average papers from top institutions are better, so they will use that belief to grade both types of papers differently
- ▶ Taste-based discrimination: reviewers have a preference for papers from top institutions

**SPOILER:** evidence of both in our setting

Statistical

Taste-based

Networking

## Conclusions

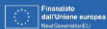
- ▶ We provide **causal evidence** showing the impact of revealing affiliation on conference admission
- ▶ Affiliation bias likely to be a **pervasive behaviour** since the doctoral stage
- ▶ Results compatible with **in-group favouritism, statistical and taste discrimination**
- ▶ Affiliation bias **shapes the composition of conferences** towards more prestigious institutions
- ▶ **Females and first-gen** applicants more likely to be admitted under non-visible affiliation reviewing

# Thank you for your attention!

*Link to the Working Paper:*



*agueda.solisalonso@carloalberto.org*



Finanziato  
dall'Unione europea  
NextGenerationEU



Ministero  
dell'Università  
e della Ricerca



UNIVERSITÀ  
DI TRENTO

## Annex

## Data Collected - Additional variables

- ▶ Importance of paper/author characteristics for judging research quality (title, no., gender and seniority of authors, institutional affiliation, journal, etc.)
  - ▶ For oneself
  - ▶ Perceived for the Economics profession
- ▶ **Perceived institutional quality:**
  - ▶ *This institution is Elite/Above average/Average/Below average/Don't know*
- ▶ **Individual characteristics:**
  - ▶ Gender, country of origin, year of enrollment in PhD, parental education

[Survey timeline](#)

[Importance of Signals](#)

[Descriptives](#)

[Back](#)

# Survey timeline

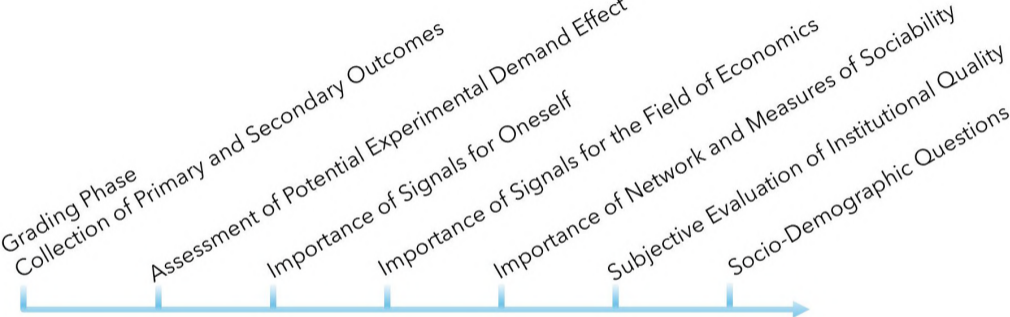


Figure: Timeline of the survey

# Descriptive Statistics - Demos

Table: Descriptive Statistics

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>
University ranked in QS	140	0.76
Position of University in QS Ranking	107	172.58
Gender: Male	140	0.72
Gender: Female	140	0.28
Parents ED: Not tertiary	140	0.37
Parents ED: Tertiary	140	0.62
Parents ED: Not reported	140	0.01
Country: Not reported	140	0.06
Country: Eastern Europe	140	0.06
Country: Northern Europe	140	0.04
Country: Outside of Europe	140	0.36
Country: Southern Europe	140	0.30
Country: Western Europe	140	0.19
PhD start year: 2014-2018	139	0.18
PhD start year: 2019	139	0.22
PhD start year: 2020	139	0.19
PhD start year: 2021	139	0.22
PhD start year: 2022-2023	139	0.19
PhD start year: Not reported	139	0.01
Survey response	156	0.90

# Descriptive Statistics - Signal importance

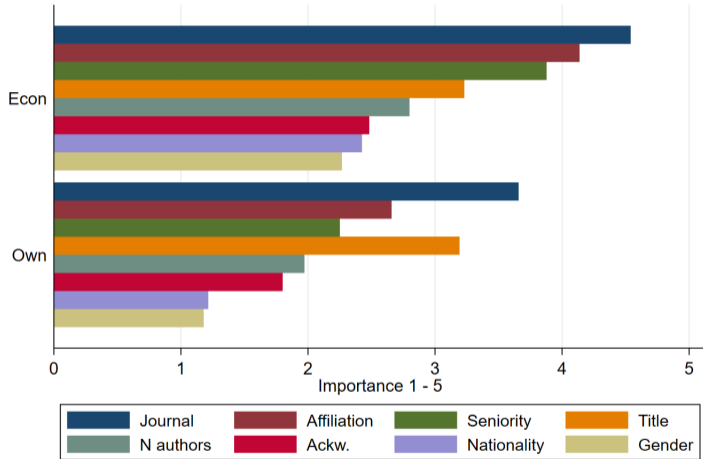


Figure: Importance of signals

# Why top 75?

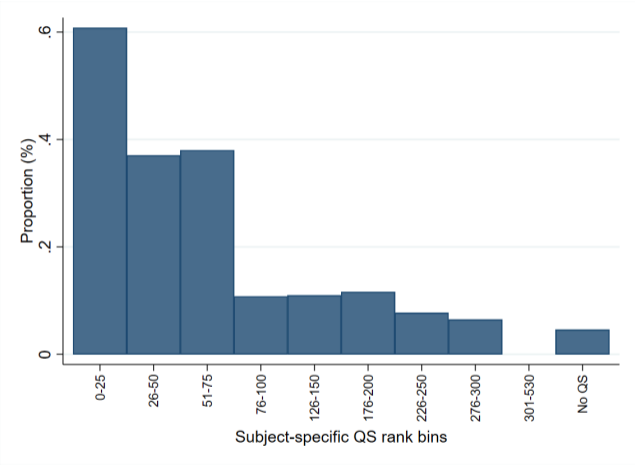


Figure: Proportion of Universities classified as *Elite* by reviewers

# Balance checks

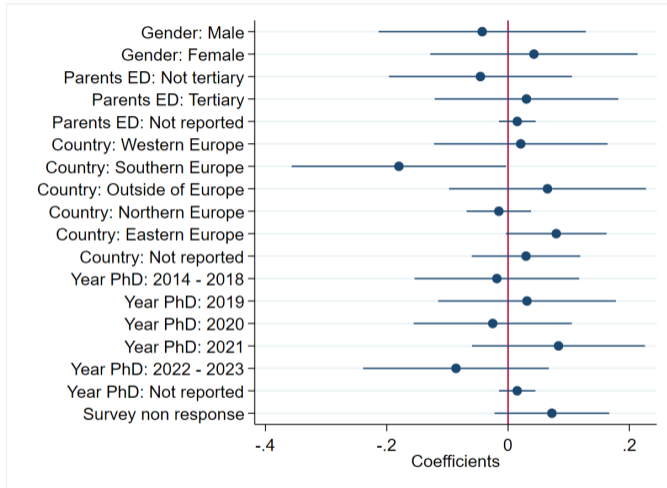
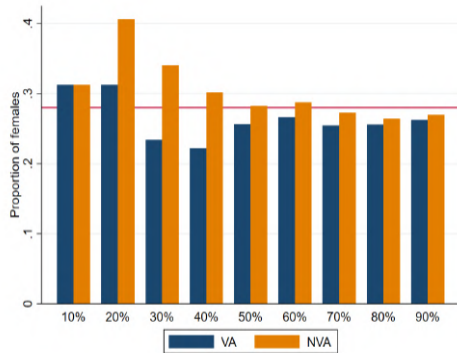
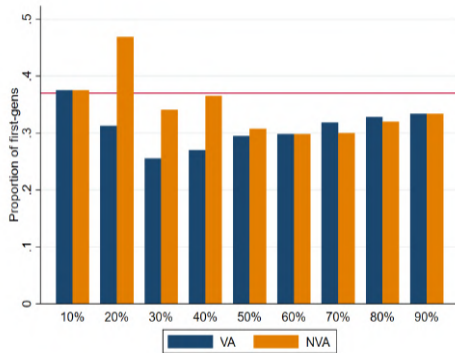


Figure: Balance checks

## Results: Conference composition by acceptance rate



(a) Gender composition, by acceptance rate and treatment group



(b) Socio-economic composition, by acceptance rate and treatment group

## Robustness: Covariates and FEs

	(1)	(2)	(3)
<b><i>Panel A: Overall score</i></b>			
<i>VA</i> × <i>Top 75</i>	1.62*** (0.55)	1.22** (0.59)	1.09* (0.57)
<b><i>Panel B: Position in ranking</i></b>			
<i>VA</i> × <i>Top 75</i>	18.59*** (3.42)	17.21*** (3.39)	16.91*** (2.89)
<b><i>Panel C: Suggestion for inclusion</i></b>			
<i>VA</i> × <i>Top 75</i>	0.20*** (0.06)	0.18*** (0.06)	0.16*** (0.05)
Covariates	Yes	No	Yes
Fixed Effects	Paper by Block	Paper by Block	Paper

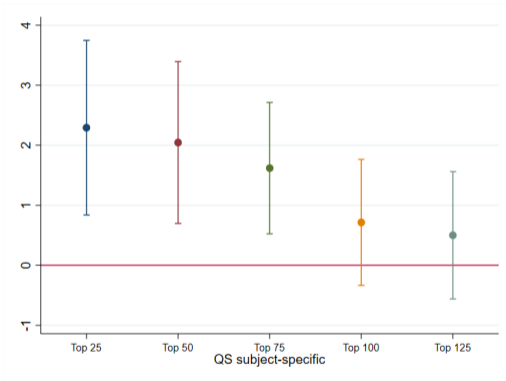
## Robustness: Multiple Hypothesis Testing

Outcome	Model	Resample	Holm	Bonferroni
Overall score - <i>VA</i>	0.39	0.57	0.57	1.00
Overall score - <i>VA</i> $\times$ <i>Top75</i>	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.02
Suggestion for inclusion - <i>VA</i>	0.05	0.19	0.56	1.00
Suggestion for inclusion - <i>VA</i> $\times$ <i>Top75</i>	0.00	0.01	0.03	0.03
Position in ranking - <i>VA</i>	0.18	0.37	0.73	1.00
Position in ranking - <i>VA</i> $\times$ <i>Top75</i>	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

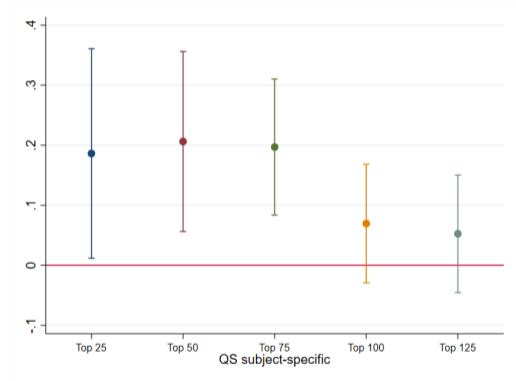
Back

# Robustness: Cutoff choice for “Top” institutions

Figure: Robustness of results to different thresholds for university selectivity



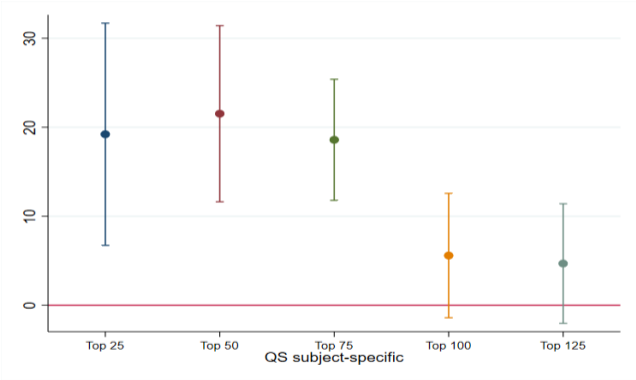
(a) Overall Score



(b) Suggested for acceptance

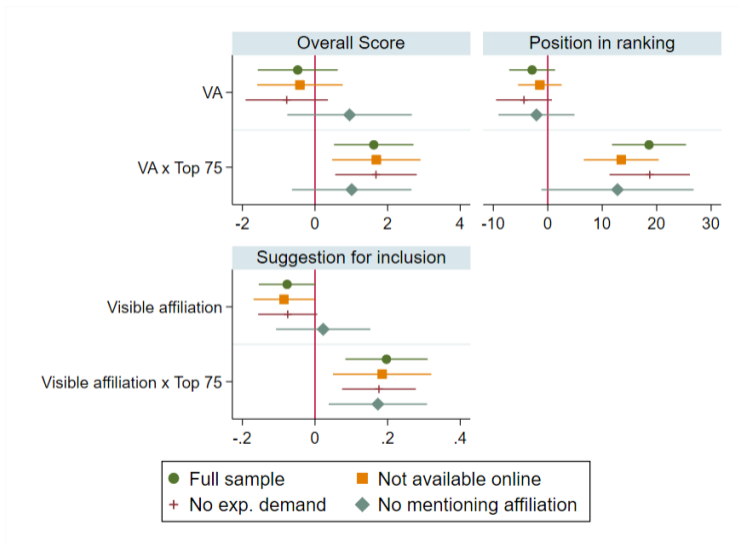
# Robustness: Cutoff choice for “Top” institutions

Figure: Robustness of results to different thresholds for university selectivity

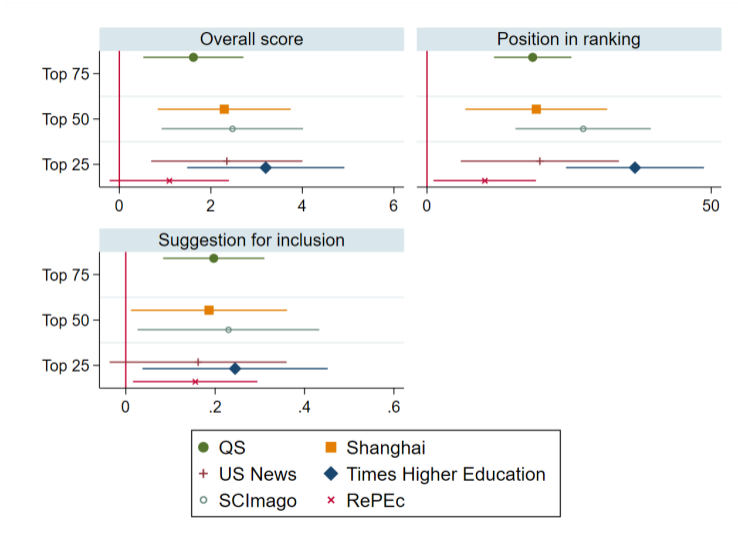


(a) Position in the ranking

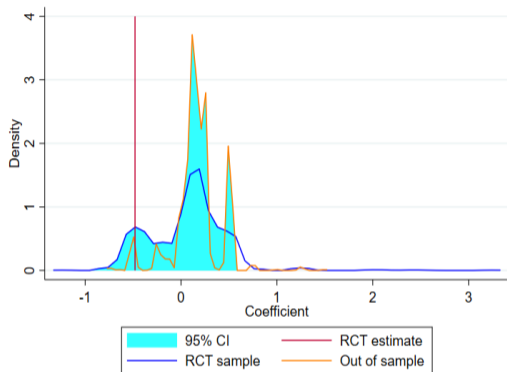
# Robustness: Affiliation salience/ task perception and EDE



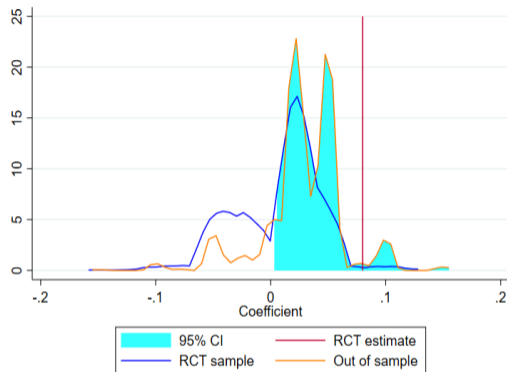
# Robustness: Alternative rankings



# Additional Results



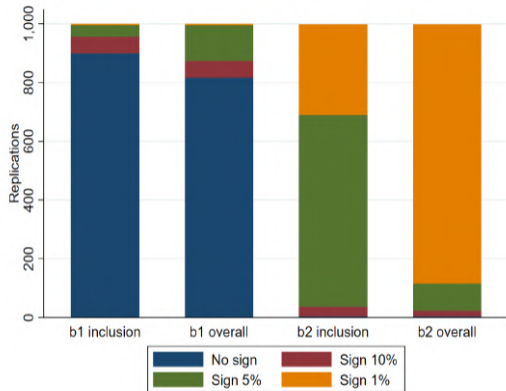
(a)  $\beta_1$  Overall score



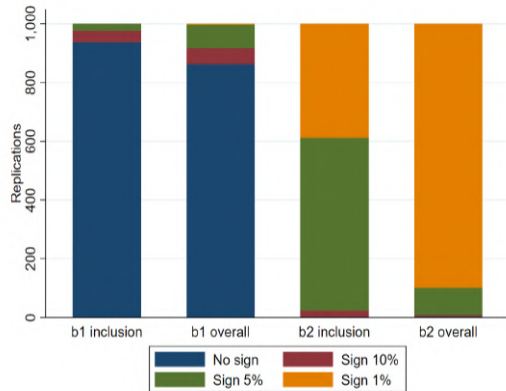
(b)  $\beta_1$  Suggestion for inclusion

Figure: Kernel Densities of the two simulations for  $\beta_1$  Overall score and Suggestion for inclusion

# Predicted Significance



(a) In-sample simulation



(b) Out-of-sample simulation

Figure: Predicted significance for each simulated  $\beta$ , outcome, and simulation

# Descriptive Statistics by Top 75 Universities

Table: Socio-demos by Top 75 Universities

<i>Variable</i>	All		Top 75		Non-Top 75		Difference in means	
	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	Difference	P-value
Parents ED: Not tertiary	140	0.37	32	0.09	108	0.45	-0.36	0.00
Parents ED: Tertiary	140	0.62	32	0.91	108	0.54	0.37	0.00
Gender: Male	140	0.72	32	0.75	108	0.71	0.04	0.68
Gender: Female	140	0.28	32	0.25	108	0.29	-0.04	0.68
Country: Eastern Europe	140	0.06	32	0.00	108	0.07	-0.07	0.11
Country: Northern Europe	140	0.04	32	0.09	108	0.02	0.08	0.04
Country: Outside of Europe	140	0.36	32	0.44	108	0.33	0.10	0.28
Country: Southern Europe	140	0.30	32	0.22	108	0.32	-0.11	0.26
Country: Western Europe	140	0.19	32	0.22	108	0.19	0.03	0.68
PhD start year: 2022-2023	139	0.19	32	0.31	107	0.15	0.16	0.04

Back

# List of selective universities

Table: Selective institutions and position in the 2023 Economics and Econometrics QS Ranking

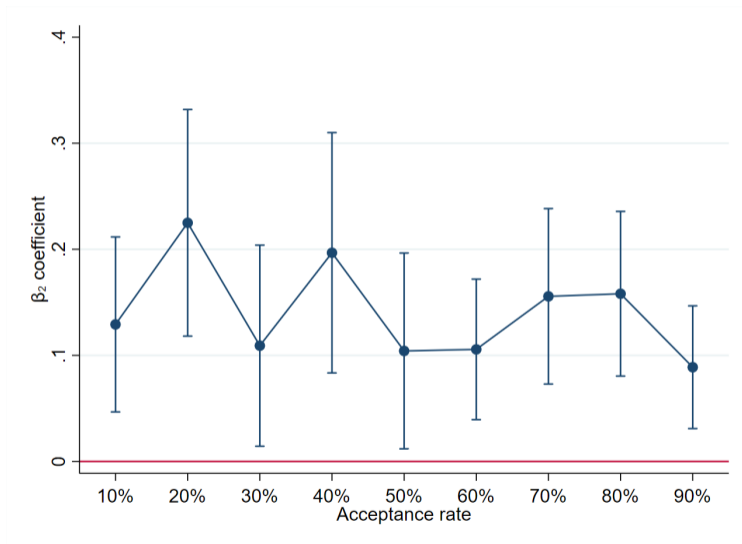
Institution	QS
Harvard University	1
Stanford University	3
LSE	7
University of Oxford	9
Columbia University	10
University of Cambridge	12
University of Pennsylvania	13
Bocconi University	16
University College London	17
University of Warwick	22
Boston University	22
Universitat Pompeu Fabra	26
Imperial College London	31
ETH Zürich	34
LMU Munich	38
Universität Mannheim	43
Erasmus University Rotterdam	45
PSE	54
Barcelona School of Economics	62
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona	62
University of Amsterdam	67
Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne	73
Ecole Polytechnique Paris	76
KU Leuven	77
Humboldt Uni. of Berlin	78
Queen Mary University of London	84
University of Bologna	85
Sciences Po	89
UCLouvain	91
VU Amsterdam	100
CEMFI	n/a
Bank of Italy	n/a

## Results: Main outcomes

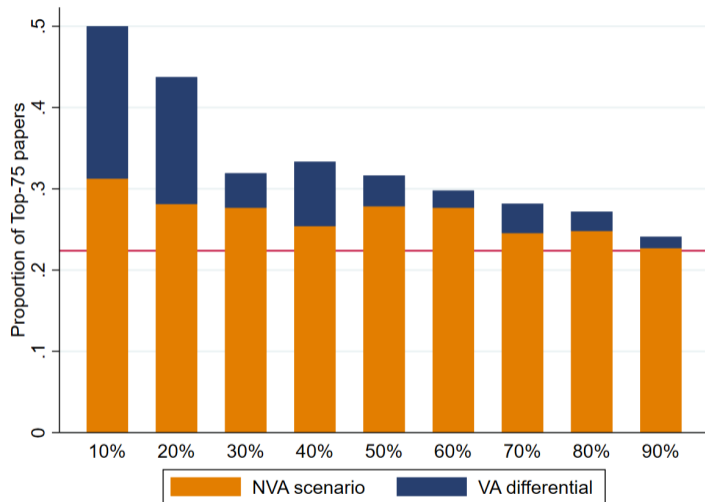
Table: Main estimates

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Overall score	Position in ranking	Suggestion for inclusion
VA	-0.48 (0.55)	-2.87 (2.11)	-0.08* (0.04)
VA $\times$ Top 75	1.62*** (0.55)	18.59*** (3.42)	0.20*** (0.06)
N	977	985	985
Control mean	20.31	78.13	0.55

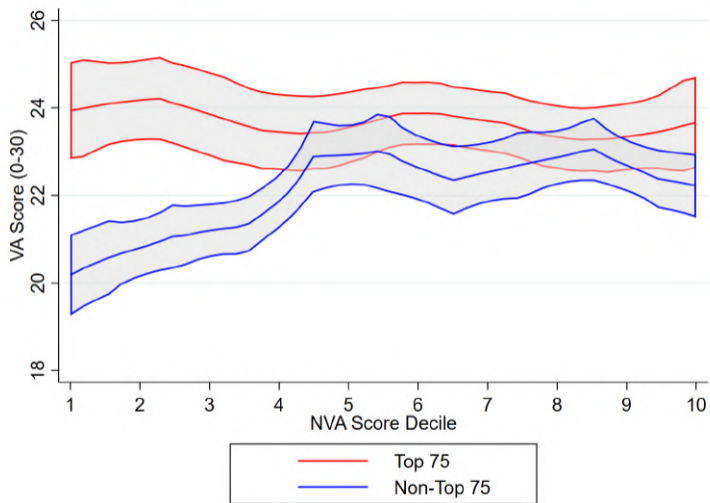
## Results: Acceptance premium by acceptance rate



## Results: Conference composition by acceptance rate



## Results: Quality of the selection



## Results: Heterogeneity by reviewer type

Table: Heterogeneity: By reviewer type

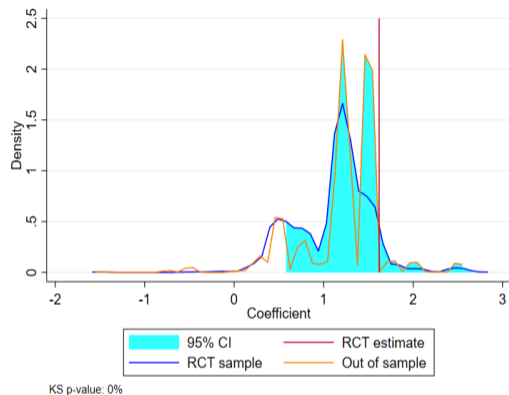
	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Overall score	Position in ranking	Suggestion for inclusion
<b><i>Panel A: Selective Reviewers</i></b>			
$VA \times Top\ 75$	3.15** (1.17)	24.03*** (8.56)	0.27** (0.12)
Paper FE	Y	Y	Y
Observations	396	398	400
<b><i>Panel B: Non-Selective Reviewers</i></b>			
$VA \times Top\ 75$	0.62 (0.74)	5.44 (5.70)	0.14* (0.08)
Paper FE	Y	Y	Y
Observations	700	701	701

## External validity - a Large Language Model approach

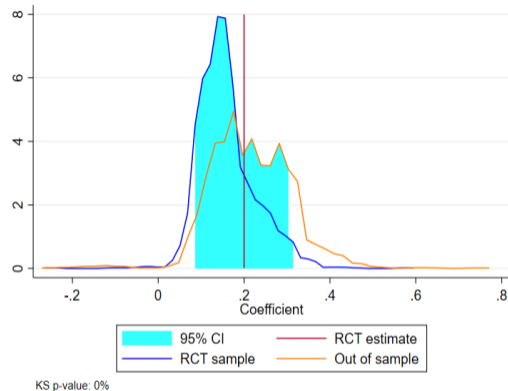
- ▶ LLMs are effective in predicting results from both lab (Aher et al., 2023) and field experiments (Chen et al., 2024).
- ▶ They can even outperform human experts' predictions (Lippert et al., 2024).
- ▶ We elicit predictions for  $\beta_1$  and  $\beta_2$  for Overall score and Suggestion for inclusion
- ▶ Two prompts: one replicating our sample, one "Out of sample"

Back

# Simulation Results



(a)  $\beta_2$  Overall score



(b)  $\beta_2$  Suggestion for inclusion

Figure: Kernel Densities of the two simulations for  $\beta_2$  Overall score and Suggestion for inclusion

# Mechanisms

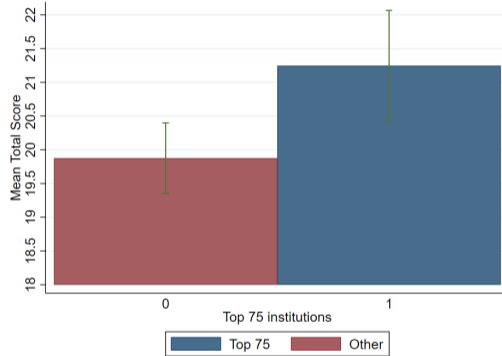
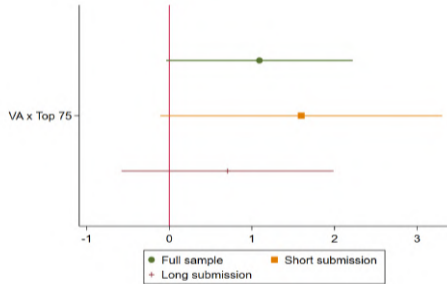
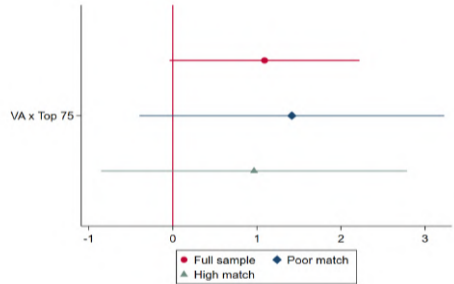


Figure: Average Overall Score in the NVA group, by Top 75/non-Top 75

# Mechanisms



(a) Affiliation bias, by submission length



(b) Affiliation bias, by submission-reviewer similarity

Statistical discrimination would decrease with availability of information

[Back](#)

[Conclusion](#)

# Mechanisms

## A networking incentive?

Table: Willingness to discuss about research with the author

	(1)	(2)	(3)
VA	-0.06 (0.05)	0.08 (0.06)	-0.12* (0.06)
VA $\times$ Top 75	0.16** (0.06)	-0.06 (0.12)	0.30*** (0.07)
Reviewer type	All	Selective	Non selective
N	1107	400	701
Control mean	0.51	0.44	0.56

Not the driver of our results [Back](#) [Conclusion](#)