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(Re)Framing Campus DEI: How Language and Ideology Shape Support Among Faculty, Staff, and Students

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Abstract

Political attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives have intensified pressures on U.S. colleges and universities to reconsider how they communicate equity work. Guided by Framing Theory, this experiment tested whether message framing interacts with ideological belief systems to shape support for campus equity initiatives. A national sample of 770 students, faculty, and staff were randomly assigned to read one of three vignettes describing the same equity initiative framed as “DEI”, “Belonging”, or “Equal Opportunity”, then rated their support for the initiative. Additionally, participants completed validated measures of race-evasive ideology and social dominance orientation (SDO). Results suggested that the group who received DEI terminology reported significantly lower support than the alternative frames. Higher levels of race-evasive ideology and SDO predicted lower support overall, with these effects most pronounced under the DEI frame and attenuated under Belonging and Equal Opportunity. Taken together, the results show that language influences stakeholder support but that ideological commitments explain more variance than framing alone. Strategic framing may broaden coalitions in anti-DEI climates, yet enduring progress requires addressing the underlying beliefs that sustain resistance.

Introduction

In recent years, conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in higher education have shifted in tone, visibility, and consequence. What was once discussed in mission statements, faculty meetings, and student affairs programming as part of an institution’s commitment to equity has increasingly moved into the center of public and political debate. For many campuses, this shift has not been abstract. It has unfolded through policy proposals, public hearings, media coverage, and, at times, direct constraints on what can be taught, funded, or publicly supported. Following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and other Black people, the 2020 racial uprisings intensified public attention to anti-Black racism, police violence, and institutional accountability. In higher education, this moment prompted renewed scrutiny of whether colleges and universities were meaningfully addressing racial inequity in their policies, practices, and campus climates (Briscoe et al., 2025; Johnson & Harper, 2024). As a result, DEI initiatives became more visible, and, in turn, more contested. Opponents of DEI initiatives have strategically reframed them as divisive, un-American, and ideologically partisan, despite being once viewed as a moral barometer of an institution's commitment to social justice (Johnson & Harper, 2024). This shift in framing has not occurred in a vacuum. Rather, it appears to reflect a broader pattern of coordinated messaging across political, media, and policy spheres, including contributions from conservative lawmakers, prominent media voices, and policy organizations such as the Manhattan Institute and the Heritage Foundation (Johnson, 2024; Lopéz et al., 2021). Through legislative proposals, public discourse, and strategic communication campaigns, these actors have sought to redefine how equity-oriented work is understood within higher education and beyond.

These pressures have materialized in concrete and consequential ways. Since 2020, legislative and executive efforts to restrict DEI initiatives in higher education have expanded across both federal and state contexts. At the federal level, executive actions have targeted DEI infrastructure, programming, and training (Exec. Order No. 14,151, 2025; Exec. Order No. 14,173, 2025), while more than 30 state-level bills have sought to restrict DEI initiatives in colleges and universities. At least 18 of these state measures have been signed into law, resulting in the elimination of DEI offices, restrictions on mandatory campus DEI training, and, in some cases, limitations on the use of specific terms in official communications (Hoyos Ensuncho, 2025; The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2025). These efforts have effectively chilled race-conscious dialogue on campuses and constrained institutional capacity to pursue equity-oriented goals (Johnson & Harper, 2024).

In response, many college and university leaders have proactively reframed their public messaging. Terms such as "belonging," "inclusive excellence," or "student success" are increasingly deployed as substitutes for DEI as they are presumed to be less politicized and more palatable across ideological divides (Johnson & Strayhorn, 2025; Salazar Montoya, 2024). Yet this shift raises an important question: *Can changing the language of equity work meaningfully broaden support, or does resistance reflect deeper ideological commitments that are not easily reframed?* This question points to a broader strategic tension confronting higher education leaders. On one hand, reframing equity initiatives may serve as a pragmatic response to political constraints, enabling institutions to sustain key functions under less contested terminology. On the other hand, such shifts risk diluting the explicit naming of structural inequality that has long been central to equity work. Despite the urgency of this tension, empirical research has not kept pace. In particular, we lack studies that directly test whether alternative frames meaningfully shape

support for campus equity initiatives—and whether such effects are conditioned by individuals' underlying ideological beliefs. In this sense, the question is not simply whether reframing works, but whether it constitutes a strategic adaptation that sustains equity work or a shift that ultimately reshapes (and potentially weakens) its underlying commitments.

This study addresses that gap through an experimental design that examines both message framing and ideological orientation. Using randomized vignettes, we test whether framing a campus equity initiative in terms of "DEI," "belonging," or "equal opportunity" differentially influences support among university faculty, staff, and students. In this study, we treat these terms as distinct institutional frames for communicating the same equity-oriented initiative. DEI refers to explicit diversity, equity, and inclusion language that names institutional efforts to address representation, inequitable outcomes, and inclusive campus environments (Stewart, 2017). Belonging refers to a relational frame focused on whether campus members feel welcomed, valued, connected, and able to participate fully (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Equal opportunity refers to a universalist fairness frame focused on reducing barriers and ensuring that all campus members have a fair chance to access resources and succeed (Coleman, 1968. We operationalize these terms as attribute frames: the substantive initiative remained constant across conditions, while only the focal label (i.e., DEI, belonging, or equal opportunity) varied. We also examine the role of two ideological belief systems, race-evasive ideology and social dominance orientation, that are consistently associated with resistance to structural equity efforts (Neville et al., 2000; Pratto et al., 1994; Hoyt et al., 2023). By modeling both framing effects and ideological predictors, this study moves beyond assessing whether language matters to interrogating when, for whom, and under what conditions framing shapes support.

Guided by framing theory (Chong & Druckman, 2007), this study advances the literature in several keyways. First, it extends experimental research on framing from K–12 policy contexts to higher education, where equity discourse is increasingly politicized and institutionally consequential. Second, it integrates ideological belief systems into the analysis of framing effects, offering a more precise account of how individuals interpret and respond to equity-related messages. Third, it tentatively explores whether framing may influence support, while considering the possibility that such effects are constrained by underlying ideological commitments that shape receptivity to equity work. Taken together, this study seeks to offer a more cautious reconsideration of the role of language in contemporary equity debates. Rather than treating framing as a purely strategic tool, it considers the possibility that its effectiveness may depend on the ideological landscapes in which it operates. In doing so, the study aims to provide conceptual and empirical insight into the potential limits of rhetorical change and the enduring role of ideology in shaping institutional support for equity initiatives. In the next section, we outline the theoretical and empirical foundations of the study, beginning with framing theory and then examining the ideological constructs that may structure responses to equity-focused messaging.

Theoretical and Empirical Foundation

Framing, Interpretation, and the Politics of Equity Language

Framing theory offers a useful lens for examining how individuals interpret and respond to complex social issues. Frames function as organizing principles that make certain aspects of reality more salient, thereby shaping how information is processed and judged (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987). Importantly, frames do not create attitudes in a vacuum; rather, they activate pre-existing attitudes, ideological predispositions, and value orientations (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

A key distinction in the framing literature is between communication frames and attribute frames (Levin et al., 1998; Hardisty et al., 2010). Communication frames establish the broader narrative context; for example, presenting an equity policy as a matter of fairness, economic growth, or moral obligation (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Attribute frames, by contrast, are narrower, as they involve specific labels or terms attached to an issue, such as referring to racial disparities as an "achievement gap," an "opportunity gap," or "inequality in learning outcomes." Research shows that even minor wording changes can significantly shift attitudes; for instance, people express different levels of support for an identical policy when it is labeled a "carbon tax" versus a "carbon offset" (Hardisty et al., 2010).

This distinction has been especially influential in education research. Scholars have long critiqued the "achievement gap" label as a deficit-based attribute frame that centers White performance as the norm and implicitly blames students of color for structural

inequities, whereas alternative framings such as opportunity gap or educational debt redirect attention toward structural conditions (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2013). Building on this foundational work, Quinn and colleagues (2019; 2022; 2025a, 2025b) provide experimental evidence that simply substituting alternative labels, such as racial inequality in educational outcomes or opportunity gap, can reduce the endorsement of individual-level explanations and dampen anti-Black stereotypes. These studies underscore that even when the underlying policy content is identical, attribute frames can activate different cognitive associations and value judgments.

However, most prior research has focused on K–12 policy contexts and has examined framing effects primarily in terms of average shifts in attitudes Quinn et al., 2019; Quinn & Desruisseaux, 2022; Quinn, 2025a, 2025b; Quinn & Harper, 2026). Recent work has begun to show that framing effects are not uniform; for example, Quinn and Harper (2026) found that economic framing increased prioritization of racial equity in education primarily among respondents with more conservative policy positions and those less likely to endorse structural explanations for racial disparities. Less attention has been given to how framing operates in highly politicized institutional environments, such as higher education, where equity language itself has become contested (Johnson & Harper, 2024; Salazar Montoya, 2024; The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2025). This study extends prior work by examining framing in the higher education context where the language of equity is not only descriptive but politically charged. Specifically, we focus on attribute framing—the use of terms such as DEI, belonging, and equal opportunity—to test whether these labels differentially shape support for institutional initiatives. At the same time, we move beyond prior research by theorizing that framing effects are not uniform but are filtered through individuals' ideological commitments, which shape how frames are interpreted and evaluated. As Chong and Druckman (2007) emphasize, individuals process frames through motivational and cognitive filters, so ideological priors such as race-evasive worldviews or social dominance orientation are likely to condition how audiences react to different terms. In polarized campus debates, a "DEI" frame may cue perceptions of partisan conflict, whereas "belonging" or "equal opportunity" frames may resonate with values of community and fairness.

Ideological Filters: Race-Evasive Ideology and Social Dominance Orientation

To understand variation in responses to equity framing, it is important to consider the ideological belief systems that structure how individuals interpret social inequality. Two constructs are especially relevant in this context: race-evasive ideology and social dominance orientation (SDO).

Race-evasive ideology refers to the belief that race should not (and does not) matter in contemporary society. This construct builds on the foundational notion of colorblind racial ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Neville et al., 2013), which functions as a psychological mechanism for denying structural racism. In this study, we use the term 'race-evasive' rather than 'colorblind ' to align with critiques from disability justice scholars who argue that metaphors of blindness reproduce ableist assumptions (Annamma et al., 2013). People who hold race-evasive worldviews often say things like "I don't see color" or "We're all just human," which ultimately serve to minimize systemic and structural racial disparities and invalidate the need for group-based interventions (Bonilla-Silva, 2011). Prior research consistently links lower support for equity-oriented policies and greater resistance to institutional efforts that name or redress racial inequality (Neville et al., 2000; Salter et al., 2018).

Social dominance orientation (Pratto et al., 1994) captures a related but distinct dimension of ideology: the extent to which individuals prefer and justify hierarchical relationships between social groups. Individuals high in SDO are more likely to endorse beliefs in meritocracy, oppose redistributive policies, and resist equity interventions perceived as challenging the status quo (Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Ho et al., 2012). In higher education contexts, SDO has been associated with resistance to affirmative action, opposition to DEI initiatives, and rejection of structural explanations for racial disparities (Ho et al., 2015; Sidanius et al., 2008).

Recent empirical work supports the idea that these belief systems act as psychological barriers to engaging in racial justice work. For example, in a survey of 255 undergraduates conducted during the 2021 "Protect oUR Web" racial-justice protests at the University of Richmond, Hoyt et al. (2023) measured students' endorsement of race-evasive beliefs and the two subdimensions of SDO (i.e., anti-egalitarianism and dominance) and found that those high in both color evasion and anti-egalitarianism were significantly less likely to support the Black Student Coalition's demands, to view the demonstrations as effective, or to participate in related justice actions. Together, these belief systems function as interpretive filters through which individuals

evaluate equity-related messages. Rather than responding solely to the content of a frame, individuals interpret that frame in ways that are consistent with their broader ideological commitments (Chong & Druckman, 2007). As a result, the same institutional message may be received as legitimate, threatening, or irrelevant depending on the extent to which it aligns with or challenges these underlying beliefs.

Interactions Between Framing and Ideology

Although framing theory emphasizes the power of language to shape interpretation, a substantial body of research in political communication suggests that framing effects are contingent on audience predispositions (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Frames are most effective when they resonate with individuals' existing beliefs and are less effective—or even counterproductive—when they conflict with those beliefs (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019). Quinn's (2025a) work illustrates this dynamic, showing that framing effects in education policy vary across subgroups whose values align differently with the frame. However, these studies have largely focused on demographic or political subgroup differences rather than explicitly modeling the ideological mechanisms that drive these variations. Consistent with Quinn's experimental approach, the present study uses an experimental vignette design that aims to isolate the effects of attribute framing while holding initiative content constant. Extending this logic to higher education, where equity language has become especially politicized, we incorporate ideological belief systems to examine when and for whom framing shapes support. Specifically, we argue that ideological commitments condition how individuals interpret and respond to different labels for equity initiatives. Frames that explicitly signal structural inequality (e.g., DEI) may activate resistance among individuals high in race-evasive ideology or SDO, whereas more universalist frames (e.g., belonging or equal opportunity) may be less likely to trigger such resistance. This perspective shifts the analytic focus from whether framing "works" in general to when and for whom framing influences support. It also highlights a key implication: framing effects may be modest at the aggregate level not because language is unimportant, but because its impact is constrained by deeply held ideological commitments.

Current Study and Research Questions

Building on the integration of framing and ideology outlined above, the present study examines how message framing and ideological belief systems jointly shape support for campus equity initiatives. Rather than assuming that framing effects operate uniformly, we conceptualize them as contingent on individuals' underlying ideological beliefs, which influence how equity-related messages are interpreted and evaluated. To test this framework, we employ an experimental vignette design that isolates the effect of attribute framing while accounting for variation in ideological orientations. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of three brief institutional statements describing an identical campus equity initiative, framed as *DEI*, *Belonging*, or *Equal Opportunity*. The substantive content of the initiative was held constant across conditions, with only the framing label varied. After reading the vignette, participants rated their level of support for the initiative. Participants also completed validated measures of race-evasive ideology and social dominance orientation (SDO), enabling us to assess both the direct effects of ideology and its interaction with framing conditions. This design allows us to directly test whether framing effects are contingent on participants' ideological orientations, rather than reflecting uniform shifts in support across audiences.

This study addresses the following research questions and hypotheses:

- **Research Question 1**: How does message framing (e.g., Belonging, Equal Opportunity, DEI) influence support for campus equity among college/university faculty, staff, and students?
    - **Hypothesis 1**: Participants' support for campus equity will vary by message framing, such that those exposed to the "Belonging" or "Equal Opportunity" frames will report significantly higher support than those exposed to the "DEI" frame.
- **Research Question 2**: How do participants' (a) levels of race-evasive ideology and (b) levels of SDO predict their support for campus equity initiatives?
    - **Hypothesis 2**: Scores on (a) race-evasive ideology and (b) SDO will be significantly and negatively associated with support for the campus equity initiative, such that participants with higher scores on these ideological beliefs will report significantly lower levels of support regardless of framing condition.

- **Research Question 3**: How do (a) race-evasive ideology and (b) SDO interact with message framing to predict support for campus equity initiatives?
    - **Hypothesis 3**: Message framing will significantly moderate the relationship between both ideological beliefs and support for the campus equity initiative, such that the negative association between ideological belief scores and support will be strongest under the DEI frame and weaker under the Belonging and Equal Opportunity frames.

By empirically testing these relationships, this study moves beyond evaluating whether particular terms generate greater support in isolation to examining whether such differences reflect meaningful shifts in receptivity or are constrained by underlying ideological commitments. In doing so, it provides a more precise account of the limits and possibilities of strategic framing in contested higher education environments.

Methods

Procedures

We obtained IRB approval before data collection and recruited participants through Prolific, an online research panel. Data were collected in March of 2025 over a period of two weeks. Eligible participants had to be 18 years of age or older, currently affiliated with a college or university in the United States (U.S.), and identify as either faculty, staff, or student. Participants who did not meet these inclusion criteria were screened out. We included both faculty/staff, as well as students in the sample to allow for a comprehensive examination of campus climate perceptions and ensure that the findings reflect the diverse roles, responsibilities, and institutional perspectives that shape attitudes toward equity initiatives across the entire university community. Eligible individuals accessed the online survey administered via Qualtrics. They were first presented with an informed consent form and notified that participation was voluntary and could be discontinued at any time by closing the web browser. Participants who fully completed the approximately 15-minute survey received $3.20 in compensation. Data are available from the first author upon request.

Participants

Participants ranged from 18 to 77 years of age (M = 35.06, SD = 12.34). The sample included both faculty/staff (n = 416) and students (n = 346) affiliated with a U.S. college or university. Participants were recruited through Prolific and self-reported their affiliated higher education institution. Majority of participants were affiliated with a four-year institution (n = 713), and a few were affiliated with two-year institutions (n = 57). Participants resided across all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia, with the largest proportions from California (9.6%), Texas (8.3%), New York (7.0%), Florida (5.6%), and Georgia (5.6%). The sample was predominantly White (62.1%), followed by Black or African American (13.1%), Hispanic or Latino/a/x (8.8%), Asian or Asian American (8.7%), mixed race (3.9%), and other racial and ethnic groups. Participants identified across a spectrum of gender identities, including cisgender women (63.1%), cisgender men (33.1%), trans man or trans woman (2.9%), gender non-binary individuals (2.0%), and three respondents did not report their gender. Most participants identified as heterosexual (71.8%), although gay/lesbian (5.4%), bisexual (12.7%), pansexual (2.9%), queer (2.4%), asexual (2.4%), and other sexual orientations were also represented. The highest level of educational attainment among study participants varied: 4.1% held a high school diploma or equivalent, 7.2% an associate's degree, 25.5% a bachelor's degree, 22.8% a master's degree, and 13.0% a doctoral or specialist degree. Politically, most of the sample leaned liberal, with over half identifying as extremely (21.7%), moderately (28.0%), or mildly (10.6%) left-leaning, whereas 8.8% were mildly, 10.4% moderate, and 2.6% extremely right-leaning. Political affiliation included Republican (n = 149), Democrat (n = 346), Independent (n = 186), with a smaller subset of respondents indicating Green Party, Libertarian, or no political affiliation. See **Table 1** for a full breakdown of the participant sample across affiliation status.

[Table 1 Here]

Measures

Participants completed a series of self-report questionnaires assessing their support for the campus equity initiative and ideological beliefs. Additionally, a demographic questionnaire and a social desirability bias measure were used to contextualize

responses and explore subgroup patterns. The following measures were presented to study participants in a counter-balanced order.

Framing Condition and Vignette Support. Participants were randomly assigned to read a brief vignette describing a university equity initiative framed as "DEI," "Belonging," or "Equal Opportunity." The framing term was embedded four times within the vignette, which had a Flesch–Kincaid grade level of 16.4, a metric used to determine the comprehension difficulty of written material (Flesch, 1948), indicating readability appropriate for individuals with a college graduate reading level (see Appendix A for the full vignette). The vignette emphasized the institution's commitment to fostering a welcoming environment, removing participation barriers, promoting engagement across campus roles, and making resources more accessible, while highlighting benefits for the success and well-being of all campus members. After reading the vignette, participants indicated their level of support for the university's efforts on a scale from 0 to 100, with higher scores reflecting greater support.

The vignette was designed to isolate attribute framing effects while holding the substantive content of the initiative constant across conditions. The three focal terms—DEI, Belonging, and Equal Opportunity—were selected to represent distinct but commonly used frames in higher education discourse: *DEI* as an explicit equity frame, *Belonging* as a relational and inclusion-oriented frame, and *Equal Opportunity* as a more universalist fairness frame (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Coleman, 1968; Stewart, 2017). The wording across conditions was otherwise identical, allowing differences in responses to be attributed to framing rather than changes in initiative substance. Although the terms were not formally defined within the survey, this approach reflects how such language is typically encountered in institutional communications and prioritizes ecological validity. We also note that elements of the vignette (e.g., references to "all" and "everyone") reflect a broadly inclusive, universalist orientation. This was intentional, as institutional messaging often blends universalist language with equity-oriented goals (Ahmed, 2012). At the same time, this shared baseline framing may shape how participants interpret subsequent language cues and could attenuate differences across conditions, representing an important consideration for measurement validity.

Race-Evasive Ideology. The Colorblind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS; Neville et al., 2000) is a widely used measure of race-evasive ideologies that has been extensively employed in research examining a variety of race-related and social justice outcomes (Awad & Jackson, 2016). The scale includes 20-items (e.g., "Everyone who works hard, no matter what race they are, has an equal chance to become rich"), rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 6 (Strongly agree), with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement of race-evasive beliefs. Although the scale comprises three subscales (unawareness of racial privilege, unawareness of institutional discrimination, and unawareness of blatant racial issues) it is commonly used as a unidimensional measure (e.g., Mekawi et al., 2020). Given our a priori focus on broader patterns of race-evasive ideology rather than its specific components, we utilized the CoBRAS as a single composite scale in the present study. The CoBRAS has been shown to demonstrate convergent validity, as greater endorsement of race-evasiveness is associated with higher levels of racial prejudice and stronger beliefs that society is just and fair (Neville et al., 2000). In the original validation study, the CoBRAS demonstrated strong internal consistency, with coefficient alphas ranging from .84 to .91 across subscales (Neville et al., 2000). In the present study, the unidimensional CoBRAS scale also showed high internal consistency ($\alpha = .94$), supporting its reliability within our sample.

Social Dominance Orientation. SDO was measured using the 16-item SDO-7 scale (Ho et al., 2015), which assesses individual differences in support for group-based hierarchy and inequality. The measure includes two counterbalanced subscales: Social Dominance Orientation–Dominance (SDO-D) and Social Dominance Orientation–Egalitarianism (SDO-E). Each subscale consists of eight items, with SDO-D assessing pro-dominance (e.g., "Some groups of people are just more worthy than others") and anti-dominance attitudes (e.g., "No one group should dominate in society" [reverse scored]), and SDO-E assessing pro-egalitarian (e.g., "We should work to give all groups an equal chance to succeed") and anti-egalitarian attitudes (e.g., "We shouldn't try to guarantee that every group has the same quality of life" [reverse scored]). Items are rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (Strongly oppose) to 7 (Strongly favor). Although these subdimensions are frequently examined separately, Barry (2022) noted that SDO-D and SDO-E are highly intercorrelated ($r = .83$), and that cumulative evidence does not support treating them as empirically distinct. Therefore, consistent with prior recommendations, we computed a total composite score by averaging all items, with higher scores representing a greater preference for group-based hierarchy and inequality. Convergent validity of the measure is supported by its consistent associations with related constructs, including prejudice, ethnocentrism, and opposition to

egalitarian social policies (Ho et al., 2015). The original validation study reported an average internal consistency coefficient of α = .92 across six samples, and the present study demonstrated similarly strong reliability (α = .92).

Social Desirability. The original Marlowe–Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960) was used to assess participants' patterns of social desirability bias. The questionnaire includes 33self-report items in which participants respond "True" or "False" to a series of statements reflecting culturally approved but unlikely behaviors (e.g., "I have never intensely disliked anyone") or socially undesirable but common behaviors (e.g., "I sometimes feel resentful when I don't get my way"). Items were coded such that socially desirable responses received a score of 1 and all other responses received a score of 0. Consistent with the published scoring key, 22 items were keyed "True," and 11 items were keyed "False." Responses were summed to create a total score ranging from 0 to 33, with higher scores indicating a greater tendency to respond in a socially desirable manner. The scale has demonstrated good internal consistency (α ≈ .70–.88 across studies) and test–retest reliability, as well as evidence of construct validity in relation to measures of impression management and self-deception (Lambert et al., 2016).

Analytic Plan and Preliminary Results

First, the data were screened and evaluated to assess assumptions relevant to the general linear model and structural equation modeling approaches. The initial dataset included 904 total respondents. There were 95 truly empty cases removed for having no usable data, and an additional 31 were excluded for incomplete responses. Eight respondents were removed for failing an attention check item embedded within the survey. The final analytic dataset consisted of 770 participants with valid responses on all primary study variables. Missingness of remaining data was minimal, with only eight cases missing data on political ideology; these were handled using full information maximum likelihood (FIML) in the structural model. No variables demonstrated problematic distributions.

To examine differences based on institutional context, participants' institutional affiliations were coded according to whether the institution was in one of the 18 U.S. states that had enacted statewide anti-DEI legislation affecting public higher education (Hoyos Ensuncho, 2025; The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2025). Institutions located in these states were coded as 1 (*n* = 275; 35.7%), whereas institutions located in states without enacted anti-DEI legislation were coded as 0 (*n* = 438; 56.9%). Fifty-seven (7.4%) responses were excluded from coding because participants either declined to report their institutional affiliation or provided information that could not be used to reliably identify an institution. To facilitate parsimonious modeling and ensure adequate statistical power for subgroup comparisons, race was recoded into a dichotomous variable contrasting White participants (reference group; *n* = 480) with participants of Color (*n* = 290). Political party identification was collapsed into four categories: Republican, Democrat, Independent/Green/Libertarian, and No Political Affiliation, and was represented in the SEM using three dummy variables with Republicans as the reference group. Institutional affiliation was similarly operationalized as a binary variable (0 = faculty/staff, 1 = student). This allowed for the inclusion of theoretically relevant sociodemographic covariates while maintaining model stability and interpretability.

To address Research Question 1, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine whether mean levels of support for campus equity differed as a function of message framing condition (DEI, Belonging, Equal Opportunity). This approach enabled a direct test of between-group differences in average support across experimentally manipulated framing conditions. To address Research Questions 2 and 3, a fully specified multi-group structural equation model with observed variables was estimated using the *lavaan* package in R. In this model, support for campus equity was regressed on race-evasive ideology, social dominance orientation, and the full set of covariates, with framing condition specified as the grouping variable. Exogenous predictors were treated as random observed variables, and their variances and covariances were freely estimated within each framing group. Because this specification resulted in a fully saturated configural model, global fit indices are reported for completeness but are not substantively interpreted. Instead, moderation was evaluated using nested equality-constrained models. Specifically, a chi-square difference test comparing a model with freely estimated regression paths to a model constraining those paths to equality across groups was used to assess overall moderation. Following this omnibus test, Wald tests and pairwise comparisons of regression parameters were conducted to identify which specific structural paths differed across framing conditions. Pearson product-moment correlations between study variables are available in **Table 2**.

[Table 2 Here]

Results

To evaluate whether support for the campus equity initiative differed across message framing conditions (Research Question 1), a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was first conducted with framing condition (DEI, Belonging, Equal Opportunity) as the independent variable and support for campus equity as the dependent variable. The analysis yielded a statistically significant main effect of framing condition, $F(2, 767) = 6.75$, $p = .001$, indicating that mean levels of support varied across conditions. The associated effect size was small ($h^2 = .017$), suggesting that although framing conditions exerted a statistically reliable influence on support, the magnitude of this effect was modest. Inspection of descriptive statistics revealed a consistent pattern across conditions. Participants in the DEI condition reported the lowest levels of support ($M = 76.76$, $SD = 26.71$, $n = 259$), whereas participants in the Belonging condition reported the highest levels of support ($M = 83.31$, $SD = 19.69$, $n = 254$), followed closely by those in the Equal Opportunity condition ($M = 82.57$, $SD = 19.25$, $n = 257$). Notably, variability in responses was greater within the DEI condition, as reflected by the larger standard deviation, suggesting more heterogeneous reactions to this framing relative to the other conditions.

To further probe these differences, Tukey-adjusted pairwise comparisons were conducted. Results indicated that participants exposed to the Belonging frame reported significantly greater support than those exposed to the DEI frame (mean difference = 6.55, SE = 1.96, 95% CI [1.95, 11.15], $p = .002$). Similarly, participants in the Equal Opportunity condition reported significantly greater support than those in the DEI condition (mean difference = 5.81, SE = 1.95, 95% CI [1.23, 10.40], $p = .008$). In contrast, the difference between the Belonging and Equal Opportunity conditions was not statistically significant (mean difference = 0.74, SE = 1.96, 95% CI [−3.87, 5.35], $p = .925$), indicating that these two alternative framing strategies yielded comparable levels of support. Taken together, these findings provide empirical support for the hypothesis that framing campus equity initiatives in terms of belonging or equal opportunity elicits greater support than framing them explicitly as DEI initiatives.

Race-Evasive Ideology

To examine whether race-evasive ideology and social dominance orientation predicted support for campus equity and whether these associations varied by framing condition (Research Questions 2 and 3), a multi-group structural equation model was conducted in which support for campus equity was regressed on race-evasive ideology, social dominance orientation, and covariates (social desirability, age, race, political affiliation, institutional affiliation, and whether the participant's institution was located in a state with enacted anti-DEI legislation affecting public higher education). Framing condition specified as the grouping variable. A chi-square difference test comparing a model with freely estimated regression paths to a model constraining those paths to equality across groups was statistically significant, $c^2(14) = 42.37$, $p < .001$, indicating that at least one structural path differed across framing conditions and providing evidence that framing condition moderated associations with support for campus equity. To further probe the nature of this moderation, Wald tests of parameter constraints and pairwise comparisons were conducted to identify which specific regression paths differed across framing conditions. These tests allowed for direct comparison of path coefficients between conditions (e.g., DEI vs. Belonging, DEI vs. Equal Opportunity, and Belonging vs. Equal Opportunity), thereby clarifying the specific sources of model non-invariance.

Across all framing conditions, race-evasive ideology emerged as a significant negative predictor of support for campus equity. Specifically, in the Belonging condition, race-evasive ideology was negatively associated with support ($b = −0.31$, $SE = 0.07$, $z = −4.33$, $p < .001$, $\beta = −.33$), such that higher endorsement of race-evasive beliefs corresponded to lower levels of support. A similar pattern was observed in the Equal Opportunity condition ($b = −0.25$, $SE = 0.08$, $z = −3.32$, $p = .001$, $\beta = −.27$). In the DEI condition, this association was stronger ($b = −0.63$, $SE = 0.08$, $z = −8.42$, $p < .001$, $\beta = −.52$). Pairwise comparisons indicated that the slope was stronger in the DEI condition than in the Belonging condition ($c^2(1) = 9.65$, $p = .002$) and differed between the Belonging and Equal Opportunity conditions ($c^2(1) = 14.29$, $p < .001$), whereas the DEI and Equal Opportunity conditions did not significantly differ ($c^2(1) = 0.50$, $p = .479$). These findings suggest that explicitly DEI-framed messaging amplifies the negative association between race-evasive ideology and support for campus equity.

Social Dominance Orientation

Social dominance orientation similarly emerged as a significant negative predictor of support across all framing conditions. In the Belonging condition, higher levels of social dominance orientation were associated with lower support (b = −0.36, SE = 0.08, z = −4.35, p < .001, β = −.31). This pattern was also observed in the DEI condition (b = −0.44, SE = 0.08, z = −5.24, p < .001, β = −.30) and the Equal Opportunity condition (b = −0.39, SE = 0.07, z = −5.92, p < .001, β = −.39). Pairwise comparisons of regression coefficients indicated that the association between SDO and support did not significantly differ across framing conditions (DEI vs. Belonging: $c^2(1) = 0.42$, p = .519; DEI vs. Equal Opportunity: $c^2(1) = 0.25$, p = .619; Belonging vs. Equal Opportunity: $c^2(1) = 0.04$, p = .850), suggesting no evidence of moderation by framing condition for this predictor.

Overall, the explanatory power of the model varied across framing conditions, with the model accounting for 54.6% of the variance in support in the DEI condition, 38.9% in the Belonging condition, and 41.6% in the Equal Opportunity condition. Together, these findings indicate that both race-evasive ideology and social dominance orientation are robust predictors of support for campus equity. However, only race-evasive ideology demonstrated significant variation in its association with support across framing conditions, whereas the association involving SDO remained statistically consistent across groups. Moreover, race-evasive ideology and social dominance orientation were strongly positively associated overall, r = .695, p < .001. This pattern was replicated within each framing condition (DEI: r = .661; Belonging: r = .716; Equal Opportunity: r = .710). Accordingly, the structural coefficients for CoBRAS and SDO should be interpreted as unique associations with support for campus equity after accounting for substantial shared ideological variance. See **Figure 1** and **Figure 2**.

[Figure 1 Here]

[Figure 2 Here]

Demographic Covariates

Several covariates demonstrated significant associations with support for campus equity within specific framing conditions. Social desirability was a positive and significant predictor of support in both the Belonging condition (b = 0.88, SE = 0.34, p = .011, β = .13) and the DEI condition (b = 1.18, SE = 0.40, p = .003, β = .13), suggesting that individuals with a greater tendency toward socially desirable responding reported higher levels of support. Age was also positively associated with support in the Belonging (b = 0.23, SE = 0.09, p = .010, β = .14) and DEI (b = 0.31, SE = 0.10, p = .003, β = .14) conditions, indicating that older participants tended to report slightly higher support under these frames. Race was not a significant predictor in the Belonging or DEI conditions; however, in the Equal Opportunity condition, participants of Color reported significantly lower support compared to White participants (b = −5.06, SE = 1.97, p = .011, β = −.12). Neither political or campus affiliation were significant predictors of support in any condition, nor institutional location within a state that had enacted anti-DEI legislation significantly predicted support for campus equity in any framing condition. Taken together, these findings suggest that covariate effects were relatively modest and context-dependent, with social desirability and age showing the most consistent positive associations with support, particularly within the Belonging and DEI framing conditions. See **Table 3** and **Table 4**.

[Table 3 Here]

[Table 4 Here]

Discussion

This study builds on Framing Theory (Chong & Druckman, 2007) and scholarship on ideological resistance to equity (e.g., Neville et al., 2013; Pratto et al., 1994) to examine how rhetorical choices shape stakeholder support for equity initiatives in higher education. As hypothesized, support varied significantly by framing condition: messages framed around Belonging or Equal Opportunity generated higher support than those using the direct language of DEI. Although the effect was modest, it was consistent across conditions, reinforcing that individuals interpret messages through the lens of pre-existing beliefs and values. These findings suggest that framing operates less as a tool for shifting attitudes and more as a mechanism that activates pre-existing ideological commitments, which in turn structure responses to equity-focused messaging.

Participants higher in race-evasive ideology and social dominance orientation (SDO) reported significantly lower support across all conditions. These effects were strongest under DEI framing, suggesting that DEI language more directly activates ideological resistance by explicitly naming systemic inequities and signaling redistributive aims. Importantly, however, only race-evasive ideology demonstrated evidence of framing-dependent variation, whereas social dominance orientation functioned as a stable predictor across conditions. This distinction may reflect differences in how these ideologies operate. Race-evasive ideology is closely tied to discourse about systemic inequity and may therefore be more sensitive to how such issues are framed. In contrast, social dominance orientation reflects a broader preference for hierarchical social arrangements, which may operate more consistently across contexts regardless of rhetorical framing.

Our findings extend Quinn's (2025a) experimental work by demonstrating that resistance to equity framing is not confined to K–12 policy contexts or partisan identity but is shaped by underlying ideological belief systems that remain salient in higher education. By introducing alternative frames such as Belonging and Equal Opportunity, we show that while reframing can modestly mitigate resistance, its effects are conditioned by these deeper ideological orientations. These results carry added urgency in the current sociopolitical moment, when policymakers and institutions are not only rebranding equity work but, in some cases, actively dismantling it (Johnson & Harper, 2024). While reframing initiatives may modestly widen support and help sustain key functions under less politicized banners, the findings suggest that resistance to equity initiatives is more strongly rooted in ideological commitments than in the specific language used to describe them.

This points to a central strategic tension confronting higher education leaders. Reframing equity initiatives using terms such as "belonging" or "equal opportunity" may broaden support in politically contested environments, but such shifts also raise questions about what is lost when institutions move away from explicit DEI language. From an organizational perspective, these shifts may function as strategic adaptations that allow institutions to maintain equity-related work under less contested terminology, while also reflecting dynamics of symbolic compliance or decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Espeland, 1998). In this sense, reframing may help preserve institutional legitimacy while simultaneously risking the dilution of equity goals, the erosion of accountability, or the marginalization of the populations such initiatives are intended to support (Ahmed, 2012; Ray, 2019). For example, institutions may consider adopting context-dependent communication strategies—using less politicized language in external or policy-facing contexts while maintaining explicit DEI language in internal strategic planning and accountability structures.

Moreover, the conditions under which such ideological engagement might occur are themselves increasingly constrained. Efforts to foster dialogue about structural inequality or expand racial literacy are often the very targets of contemporary political and legislative attacks, creating a paradox in which the deeper work required to engage resistance is precisely what is being restricted. In this context, reframing may function less as a solution to resistance and more as a strategy for maintaining space for equity-related work under conditions of constraint. These dynamics can be understood within a broader tradition of resistance to equity efforts that challenge existing social hierarchies. Prior scholarship shows that institutions are embedded within racialized systems of power that shape which forms of knowledge and intervention are seen as legitimate (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Ray, 2019), suggesting that debates over DEI language are not merely semantic, but reflect broader struggles over how inequality is named and addressed.

One potential pathway for navigating these tensions lies in structural approaches to equity leadership. For example, Shared Equity Leadership (SEL) distributes responsibility for equity across the institution rather than concentrating it within a single office, potentially making such work less vulnerable to political attack (Harper et al., 2025). More broadly, this aligns with arguments that sustaining equity requires structural integration, material investment, and organizational legitimacy (Achebe et al., 2022). From this perspective, framing may help maintain space for equity work, but its long-term viability depends on how deeply such commitments are embedded in institutional practice.

Finally, we found no significant differences in support by institutional role (faculty/staff vs. student), suggesting that reactions to campus equity initiatives are not simply a function of one's position within higher education. Instead, ideological beliefs emerged as more consistent predictors of support, underscoring the extent to which discussions of diversity, equity, and inclusion have become politically contested (Rooks, 2023). Notably, institutional location within a state that had enacted anti-DEI legislation was also unrelated to support for campus equity across all framing conditions. This finding is particularly noteworthy given emerging

evidence that anti-DEI policies can function as institutional cues that signal diminished commitment to diversity and inclusion, thereby reducing perceptions of identity safety and institutional support (Garr-Schultz & Carter, 2026). Taken together, these findings suggest that although anti-DEI policies may shape perceptions of campus climate, they do not necessarily reduce support for equity-promoting initiatives themselves. Rather, endorsement of such initiatives appears to remain relatively stable across legislative contexts, even as individuals differ in how they interpret and respond to the language used to describe them. Ultimately, these findings underscore both the power and the limits of framing. While strategic language choices may help institutions navigate politically constrained environments, meaningful progress likely depends on sustained commitments to equity embedded within institutional policies, practices, and cultures, as well as efforts to address the ideological beliefs that shape how such initiatives are understood and evaluated.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are a few study limitations that should be noted. First, although participants reported affiliation with higher education, institutional characteristics could not be fully verified. Therefore, its interpretation should be approached with caution given the challenges inherent in deriving state-level policy classifications from self-reported data. While we had also hoped to explore differences based on institutional type (e.g., 2-year versus 4-year institutions), insufficient variability across these groups precluded meaningful comparisons. Similarly, the decision to treat faculty and staff as a single group, rather than examining them separately, may obscure important within-group differences; this choice was driven by the study design, which did not collect data in a way that would allow for separate group comparisons, rather than a theoretical assumption that these groups are homogeneous. The use of an online panel may have also introduced sampling biases that constrains generalizability, particularly given potential differences between respondents and key decision-makers in higher education.

A further limitation relates to the vignette stimuli. Although the vignettes were theoretically grounded and designed to mirror authentic institutional communications, no formal pilot testing or expert review was conducted prior to the main study, and random assignment alone cannot ensure that participants consistently understood or processed the framing content as intended. Variability in interpretation across conditions may have introduced measurement error and attenuated observed differences. Future research should incorporate systematic vignette validation procedures and examine how framing operates in more ecologically valid contexts, including real institutional communications and policy environments. Future research should also examine whether these effects vary across different social and contextual groups, including racial identity, geographic context, sexual orientation, and political affiliation, as these factors may shape how equity-focused messages are interpreted. This is particularly important given that the current study was not designed to test subgroup differences at this level of specificity. Moreover, the cross-sectional and experimental design captures immediate responses to framing but does not assess longer-term shifts in attitudes or behavior. Longitudinal designs could assess whether repeated exposure to different frames produces cumulative effects or whether ideological commitments remain stable over time. Finally, exploring how framing interacts with organizational trust, institutional legitimacy, and perceived authenticity may further clarify when and for whom reframing strategies are effective.

Conclusion

As public opposition to DEI efforts intensifies, questions about how to communicate equity initiatives have become increasingly urgent. This study shows that ideological beliefs—particularly race-evasive ideology and social dominance orientation—are more consistent predictors of support for campus equity initiatives than framing alone. Although alternative frames such as Belonging and Equal Opportunity can mitigate some resistance, the findings suggest that language operates within broader ideological conditions that shape how equity work is interpreted. Taken together, these results highlight the limits of language as a mechanism for change alone. While framing can influence how equity initiatives are received, it does not fully override the ideological frameworks through which such efforts are evaluated. Advancing equity in higher education therefore requires not only strategic communication but also sustained engagement with the ideological and structural conditions that shape support for institutional change. In this sense, strategic framing may help broaden support in politically contested environments, but it is not a substitute for the deeper institutional commitments required to sustain equity work. Thoughtful communication remains important, yet enduring progress ultimately depends on how institutions name, protect, and embed equity in practice.

Declarations

Author Contribution

T.T. and R.J. wrote the main manuscript text. T.T. led the data analysis and funding acquisition, whereas R.J. led the conceptualization. All authors reviewed and edited the manuscript.

Data Availability

All data supporting the findings of this study are available by request from the first author.

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Tables

Tables 1 to 4 are available in the Supplementary Files section.

Figures

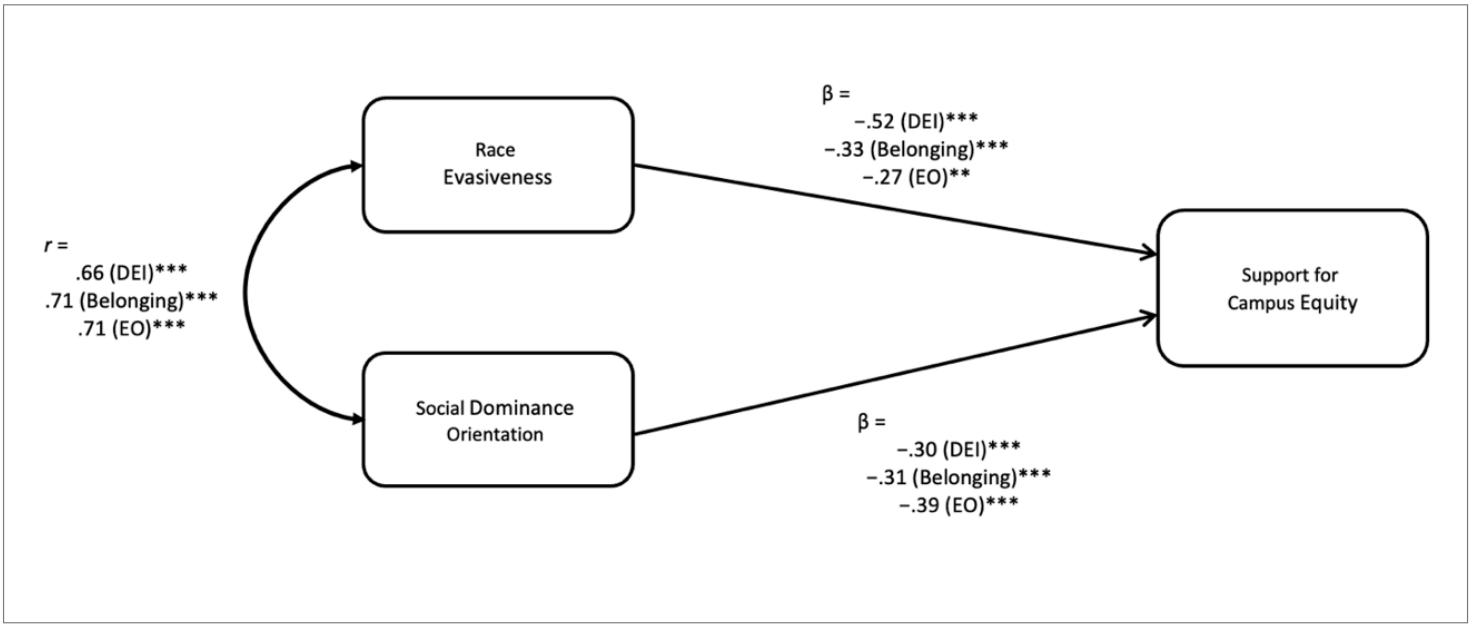


Figure 1

Structural Model of Ideological Predictors of Support for Campus Equity Across Framing Conditions

Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

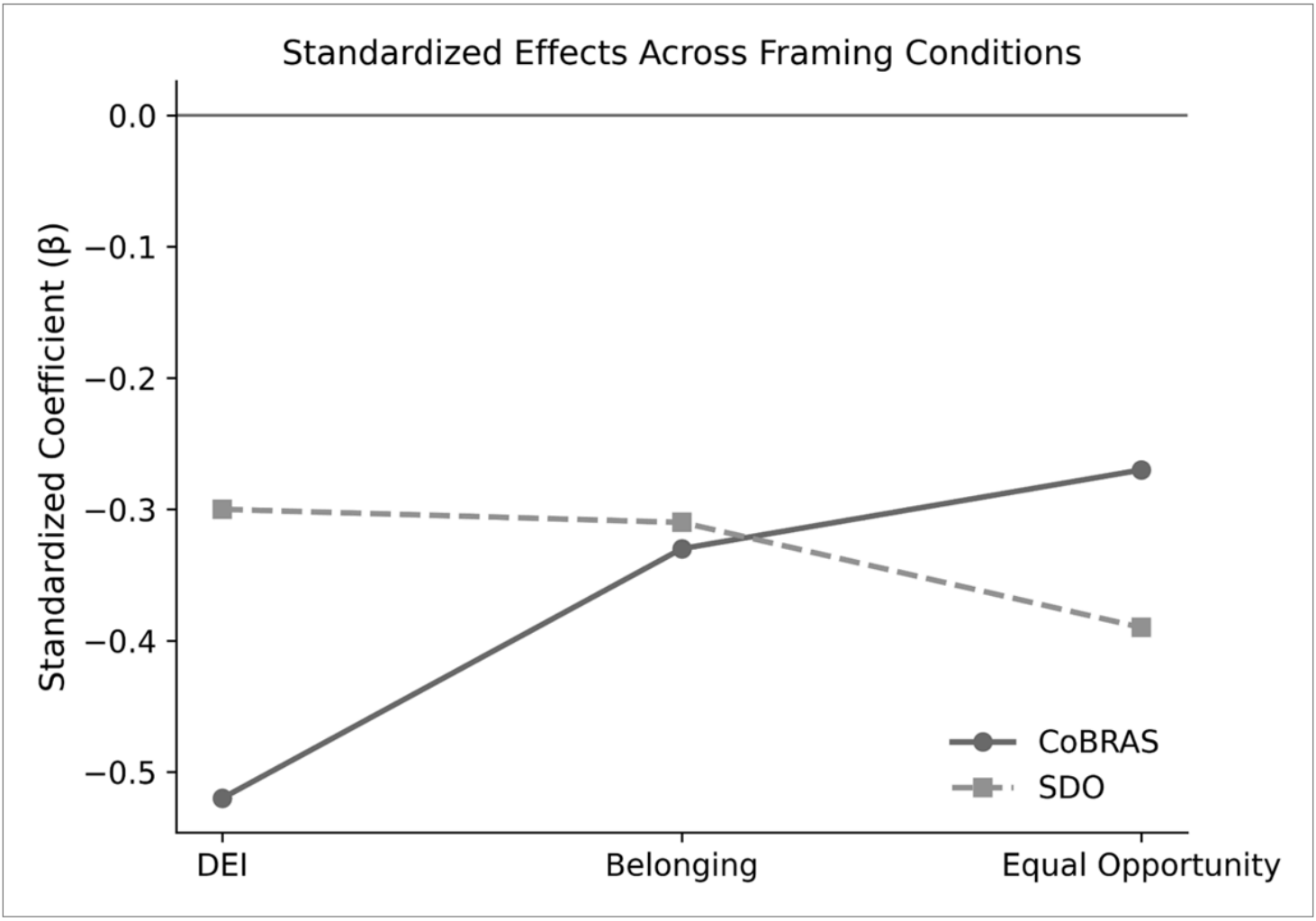


Figure 2

Standardized Regression Coefficients across Framing Conditions

Note. CoBRAS = race-evasive ideology, SDO = social dominance orientation. Negative values indicate lower support associated with higher levels of each predictor.

Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- JHETable1.docx
- JHETable2.docx
- JHETable3.docx
- JHETable4.docx