



Is Justice Really Blind? Race and Reversal in US Courts

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ABSTRACT

I use two newly collected data sets to demonstrate that black federal district judges are consistently overturned on appeal more often than white district judges, with a gap in reversal rates of up to 10 percentage points. This gap is robust and persists after taking into account previous professional and judicial experience, educational background, qualification ratings assigned by the American Bar Association, and differences in appellate panel composition. In total, I find that approximately 2,800 additional cases authored by black judges have been reversed over the last 12 years. This study is among the first to explore how higher-court judges evaluate opinions written by judges of color, and it has clear implications: despite attempts to make the judiciary more reflective of the general population, racial disparities in the legal system appear to persist.