



Bridging barriers: How COVID-19 changed racial diversity in economics seminars[☆]

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, new facts are documented on the racial distribution of seminar speakers in economics. From a sample of 270 institutions, I determined that before the COVID-19 pandemic, 82.5% of seminars were given by White speakers, 13.9% of seminars were given by Asian speakers, and 3.6% by speakers with a Hispanic-Latino or Black background. The racial distribution of speakers did not change globally. However, the share of speakers from underrepresented minorities in the United States almost doubled with the introduction of virtual seminars during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Introduction

Invited seminars are a key means of knowledge dissemination. Presenters benefit from networking and receiving feedback on their work, and hosting institutions benefit from learning about current research. The selection of speakers is important because it also influences the topics that are presented in invited seminars. The COVID-19 pandemic required seminars to be held online for a temporary period. The forced experimentation with online seminars will, hereafter, be described as the “COVID-19 shock”. Biermann (2024) presents three main findings on how the COVID-19 shock affected the organization of economics seminars. At the speaker level, economists who are women and who are more productive gave a higher number of seminars. Furthermore, the distance between hosting and guest institutions increased significantly. Doleac et al. (2021) document that in a sample of 66 institutions, 60 of which were based in the United States, fewer than 1% of seminars before the COVID-19 pandemic were given by men or women from underrepresented minority (URM) backgrounds. What is the global racial distribution of seminar speakers outside the United States? How did the COVID-19 shock change the allocation of seminars among speakers of different races? How did the share of URM speakers in the United States develop after the COVID-19 shock?

The findings of Biermann (2024) are augmented in this paper, with an examination of how the COVID-19 shock affected the racial composition of seminar speakers. It was determined that the racial composition

of speakers did not change globally. White speakers make up the majority at 82.5%, followed by Asian speakers at 13.9%, and speakers with a Hispanic-Latino or Black background accounting for only 3.6%. However, when U.S.-based institutions were the hosts, the share of speakers from underrepresented minorities nearly doubled. The United States is the country in which inequalities in racial representation have been documented most systematically (for example, Bayer and Rouse 2016).

This paper contributes to a literature that documents the underrepresentation of minorities within the economics profession. Bayer and Rouse (2016) argue that minorities are underrepresented in economics compared to other fields. Bayer et al. (2020) identify several factors that contribute to this underrepresentation, including bias, a hostile environment, the lack of information and good mentoring. Furthermore, minorities author fewer articles than would be expected from their representation in the overall population (Koffi et al., 2024b). Additionally, articles authored by minorities receive fewer citations than those written by non-minorities (Mason et al. 2022, Koffi et al. 2024a). Minorities also face barriers in accessing NBER membership (Koffi and Wantchekon, 2025). Wu et al. (2022) find an increase in ethnic diversity in conferences of fields other than economics during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This article contributes by providing new facts about the global representation of seminar speakers by race. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the COVID-19 shock temporarily reduced racial inequalities for U.S. institutions as hosting departments. More broadly, the article

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Table 1
Summary statistics of dependent variables.

Variable	Description	(1) Globally	(2) Americas	(3) Asia	(4) Europe	(5) Pacific
White _{ihst} (%)	Dummy equal to one if speaker is White	82.47	81.65	43.71	91.54	70.59
Asian _{ihst} (%)	Dummy equal to one if speaker is Asian	13.94	13.94	53.48	5.79	26.05
BHL _{ihst} (%)	Dummy equal to one if speaker is Black or Hispanic-Latino	3.59	4.41	2.81	2.67	3.36

Notes: This table reports the percentage of observations for which each dummy variable takes the value 1. Column (1) provides global summary statistics for speakers' racial backgrounds, while columns (2) to (5) present the breakdown by the continent of the hosting institution. The data cover the academic years 2018/19 and 2019/20.

relates to studies in which racial discrimination has been documented (for example, Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004, Edelman et al. 2017). The article also contributes by studying how remote online meetings have affected racial disparities in the context of economics seminars.

This study also relates to Marx et al. (2024), who find that although venture capital investment in Black entrepreneurs surged briefly after George Floyd's murder, the increase was short-lived and primarily driven by investors without prior history of funding Black entrepreneurs, suggesting tokenism. This parallel in timing implies that increased visibility and support for underrepresented groups during times of crises may follow similar patterns across different professional domains.

2. Data

The data collection builds on the work of Biemann (2024), who constructed a panel of 270 institutions that recorded economics seminars in the fall of three consecutive academic years between 2018–19 and 2020–21. Overall, the hand-collected data contain information on 11,247 seminars. As discussed by Biemann (2024), the sample consists of institutions that are larger and better ranked than average. American and European institutions are overrepresented, whereas those from Africa, Asia, and the Pacific region have a lower share than in the population.

The data are augmented by the race of the speaker, which is determined by publicly available pictures. Pictures of 99.8% of the speakers are available. The race of the speaker is determined with the algorithm by Karkkainen and Joo (2021). By incorporating a more balanced representation of non-White individuals, the algorithm enhances predictive accuracy over previous methods. I grouped the races “Middle Eastern” and “White” as White; “East Asian”, “Southeast Asian”, and “Indian” as Asian; and “Hispanic-Latino” and “Black” together. Since part of the analysis will later be focused on U.S. institutions, I will refer to the last group as URM in the U.S. context.

Table 1 provides summary statistics of the races of speakers before the COVID-19 shock. Before the COVID-19 shock (academic years 2018/19 and 2019/20), there were 7,889 seminars with 4,729 distinct speakers, whereas during the COVID-19 shock (academic year 2020/21), these numbers dropped to 3,358 seminars and 2,372 speakers. The share of White speakers dominates globally at 82.5%, followed by Asian speakers at 13.9%. Black and Hispanic-Latino speakers account for 3.6% globally. Columns (2) to (5) show the races of the speakers by continent. The share in the Americas is very similar to the global share. Within Asia, Asian speakers dominate at 53.5% followed by White speakers at 43.7%. The share of White speakers is highest in Europe at 91.5%. The share of Black and Hispanic-Latino speakers is highest in the Americas at 4.4%. By contrast, Black and Hispanic-Latino faculty made up 7.3% of all economics faculty in the United States in 2018 (Hoover and Washington, 2020), highlighting the underrepresentation of this group as seminar speakers.

3. Results

The following analysis is conducted at the level of the seminar talk. Let i denote a seminar talk held by an individual speaker, h the host institution, s the seminar series, and t the academic year in which the

seminar was held. The estimating equation at the level of the seminar talk is given by the following:

$$\text{Outcome}_{ihst} = \lambda_{hs} + \gamma \times X_i + \beta \times \mathbb{1}(t = \text{Academic year 2020/21}) + \epsilon_{ihst}, \quad (1)$$

where λ_{hs} is a host institution-seminar series specific fixed effect and where ϵ_{ihst} is the error term. The vector X_i controls for speaker experience and gender to account for contemporaneous shocks. Furthermore, X_i includes a publication score weighted by the impact factor of 140 leading journals, based on publications from 2014 to 2018.

The following analysis in Table 2 explores the association between speaker race and the COVID-19 shock.

In columns (1) to (3), it is examined how the racial composition changed globally with the COVID-19 shock. The results show that the representation of the races of the speakers did not change significantly. The share of White speakers barely changes, whereas the share of Asian speakers tends to decline and the share of Black and Hispanic-Latino speakers tends to increase, though not significantly.

In column (4), the sample is restricted to observations where the host institution is in the United States and where the speaker was likely raised in the United States, proxied by whether the first degree was obtained in the United States.¹ The results show a positive and significant coefficient at the 1% level, suggesting that the likelihood of a URM speaker in the U.S. increased by 3.5%. This suggests an almost doubling of the likelihood relative to the pre-COVID-19 average of URM speakers, which was 4.5%. The point estimate for the fall semester of the 2019/20 academic year shows no significant pre-trend. Column (5) features Black and Hispanic-Latino speakers as outcome and contains observations not used in column (4), and a zero effect is found.

With a positive association having been established between URM representation in the United States and the COVID-19 shock, the robustness of this result is explored in following discussion.

In column (1) of Table A.1, the effect is estimated using logit estimation instead of a linear probability model. The results remain robust. Seminars that were rescheduled from the spring 2020 to fall 2020 were excluded in column (2), with almost no change in the results. Seminars with pandemic-related titles were excluded from column (3), and again, the result is largely similar, though the coefficient is slightly smaller in magnitude. In column (4), the sample is restricted to institutions that reported holding at least several of their seminars online during the COVID-19 shock. The results remain robust. The quality of the speaker institution is controlled for in column (5), as Biemann (2024) demonstrated a reallocation of seminars to speakers from more elitist institutions following the COVID-19 shock. The coefficient is somewhat smaller with 3.5% but remains significant at the 1% level. Next, heterogeneity by speaker gender is explored in column (6). The effect appears to be somewhat stronger for female speakers but also remains significant at the 1% level for male speakers. Lastly, the regression in column (7) examines heterogeneity using a dummy variable set to one if the seminar series did not invite a URM speaker before the COVID-19 shock. While the baseline dummy is positive but insignificant, the interaction term is positive and significant at the 1% level. This suggests

¹ Information on the undergraduate education is available for 98.7% of the speakers that presented at a U.S. institution.

Table 2
The association between speaker race and the COVID-19 shock.

	(1) White _{isht}	(2) Asian _{isht}	(3) BHL _{isht}	(4) URM _{isht}	(5) BHL _{isht}
1(<i>t</i> = Academic year 2019/20)	0.0015 (0.0073)	0.0021 (0.0066)	-0.0036 (0.0042)	-0.0107 (0.0111)	-0.0014 (0.0047)
1(<i>t</i> = Academic year 2020/21)	0.0006 (0.0078)	-0.0039 (0.0070)	0.0033 (0.0045)	0.0351*** (0.0132)	-0.0015 (0.0048)
Mean of dep. var (pre-COVID-19)	0.825	0.139	0.036	0.045	0.034
Host institution × Seminar series FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Individual-level controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R ²	0.220	0.256	0.056	0.122	0.065
Observations	11,246	11,246	11,246	2,035	9,208

Notes: Estimates of equation (1). The outcome in column (1) is a dummy equal to one if the speakers race is White. The outcome in column (2) is a dummy equal to one if the speakers race is Asian. The outcome in columns (3) and (5) is a dummy variable equal to one if the speaker has a Black or Hispanic-Latino background. The sample in column (4) conditions on U.S. institutions as hosting departments and speakers with an undergraduate education in the United States. The outcome in column (4) is a dummy equal to one if the speaker has a URM (black or Hispanic-Latino) background. The sample in column (5) considers all observations not included in the estimation of column (4). The specifications include host institution-seminar series fixed effects and control for speakers' gender, years of experience post-PhD, and a publication score based on publications between 2014 and 2018 in 140 leading journals. The independent variable of interest is a time dummy for the academic year 2020/21. Standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the host institution-seminar series level. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

that the increase is largely driven by seminar series that previously did not invite URM speakers before, mirroring the pattern observed by Marx et al. (2024) in VC investments.

The final robustness check is reported in Table A.2 and explores the return to in-person seminars following the COVID-19 shock. This estimation is based on a balanced panel spanning five academic years (2018–19 to 2022–23) and includes data from 74 U.S. institutions. The coefficient for the academic year 2020–21 is statistically different from the academic year 2021–22 at the 5% level and from the academic year 2022–23 at the 10% level. The coefficient estimates for the academic years 2021–22 and 2022–23 are positive but insignificant.

4. Conclusion

Seminars play a crucial role in the research process by offering valuable feedback that can improve research projects. Presenting at seminars helps promote papers to potential referees and editors, which can lead to better publication outcomes. Additionally, successful scholars in the field can inspire graduate students to consider academic careers and serve as role models (Porter and Serra, 2020). The composition of seminars across races may, therefore, contribute to the lack of racial diversity in the profession, as only a few seminar speakers had an URM background before the COVID-19 pandemic (Doleac et al., 2021).

In this paper, a unique dataset is used to establish new facts on the racial representation of scholars in economics seminars. It was determined that before the COVID-19 shock, seminars were quite concentrated, with 82.5% of them presented by White speakers. The COVID-19 shock did not alter the racial distribution of seminar speakers globally. However, in this paper, it was found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, when seminars were held online temporarily, racial disparities were reduced in U.S. institutions. Although most institutions have resumed in-person seminars, some of them continue to hold virtual ones occasionally, and newly established online seminars persist, even as COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted. The results of the current study suggest that online seminars could help in bridging barriers and promoting a more equitable racial distribution within the economics profession.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econlet.2025.112345>.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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