

Title: Merit, Identity, and Redistribution: Experimental Evidence on Affirmative Action, with Ashwini Deshpande, Rajesh Ramachandran and Andis Sofianos

Speaker: Dr. Véronique Gille, University of Paris-Dauphine

Area: Public Policy

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Abstract:

We study whether opposition to affirmative action reflects general aversion to preferential treatment or bias against the social identity of beneficiaries. Using an incentivized online experiment with university students in India, we compare perceptions and behavior toward candidates admitted through caste-based versus income-based affirmative action. Evaluators assessed test-takers' competence and allocated monetary rewards under different selection rules. We find that caste-based beneficiaries from India's historically stigmatized and marginalised groups (Scheduled Castes and Tribes, or SC-ST), particularly from high-income households, are perceived as less competent, while income-based beneficiaries from non-marginalised groups are viewed more favorably. Yet, these negative perceptions do not translate into penalties: caste-based beneficiaries—especially those from low-income households—receive allocations beyond what their grades predict, whereas income-based beneficiaries are rewarded in line with perceived competence. Results highlight a duality: affirmative action elicits both identity-driven stigma and redistributive generosity. These findings show that shifting from caste to income criteria does not eliminate bias, underscoring the persistent salience of social identity in redistributive policies.

Speaker Profile:



Véronique Gille is a researcher at *Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD)* and *LEDa (Université Paris-Dauphine/PSL)* in Paris, where she works on development economics, political economics, and applied microeconomics with a focus on issues such as education, inequality, and social policy.

Webpage Link: <https://sites.google.com/site/veroniquegille/home> _