Higher Perception of Fairness Among Applicants Who Also Reviewed Proposals

Insights from the 2021 Merit Review Survey

U.S. National Science Foundation
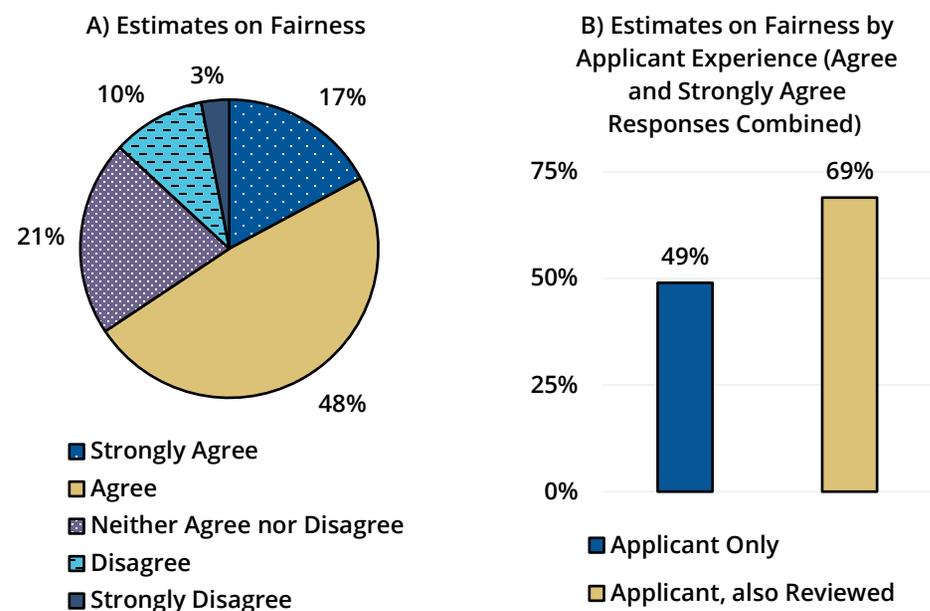Evaluation and Assessment Capability

In fall 2021, the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) administered the Merit Review Survey, a biennial web-based survey of persons who submitted proposals (i.e., applicants) and/or reviewed proposals (i.e., reviewers) between October 1, 2018, and September 30, 2020. Over 66,000 people were invited to complete the survey, with responses from over 17,000 people.

The survey questions were designed to better understand critical elements of the merit review process, including perceptions of fairness. For example, one question asks applicants to respond to the statement, "Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements: I think NSF's merit review process is fair." Results from a regression analysis that accounted for demographic and other observable characteristics estimated that overall, 65% of applicants agreed or strongly agreed that NSF's merit review process is fair.

Further examination of the regression estimates indicated that applicants' responses to this question differed depending on whether they had experience as reviewers. Specifically, 69% of applicants who submitted a proposal but also served as a reviewer agreed or strongly agreed that NSF's merit review process is fair, compared to 49% of applicants who submitted a proposal only.

To learn more about the 2021 Merit Review Survey, review the Evaluation and Assessment Capability (EAC) report, Assessment of Stakeholder Experiences With NSF's Merit Review Process, published in October 2023.

Fairness in the Merit Review Process, FY 2021

A) Estimates on Fairness

- Strongly Agree — 17%
- Agree — 48%
- Neither Agree nor Disagree — 21%
- Disagree — 10%
- Strongly Disagree — 3%

B) Estimates on Fairness by Applicant Experience (Agree and Strongly Agree Responses Combined)

- Applicant Only — 49%
- Applicant, also Reviewed — 69%

Note: In A) and B), applicant perceptions of fairness in the merit review process are based on responses to Q21A and controlled for the following characteristics: race and ethnicity, gender, disability status, NSF directorate/office, institution type, early career status, and NSF experience.

Source: Bowman, Marietta, Andrew Bryant, Richard Griffiths, Amanda Hare, Lyndsay Huey, James McCall, Jeffery Scanlon, and Breanna Wakar. 2023. *Assessment of Stakeholder Experiences With NSF's Merit Review Process: Findings From the 2021 Merit Review Survey*. Alexandria, VA: U.S. National Science Foundation.

U.S. National Science Foundation
Evaluation and Assessment Capability

DATA SNAPSHOT