

False positives and false negatives in distributional choices *

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Abstract

When benefits and burdens are distributed, decision makers are often faced with a trade-off between giving someone more than their fair share, *false positives*, and giving someone less than their fair share, *false negatives*. We present the results from the first experimental study of how people make trade-offs between these two mistakes. The study examines how an uninvolved third party makes the choice between a distribution that involves giving a payment to a number of workers who do not deserve payment and a distribution that involves not giving a payment to a number of workers who deserve payment. In a large representative sample of participants from the US and Norway, we find that a majority are false negative averse in the sense that they are more concerned with avoiding false negatives than with avoiding false positives. We also find that the aversion to false negatives is related to political affiliation, with right-wing voters being more concerned with avoiding false positives averse than others.

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