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The Cultural and Symbolic Foundations of Status Hierarchies: A Rejoinder to Biegert, Kühhirt, and Van Lanker

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Abstract: Interpretations of high-profile status attributions like NBA awards tend to come from one of two theoretical standpoints. Rational/economic models treat status assessments as socially tainted measurements of objective quality. In contrast, symbolic/cultural models interpret such assessments as culturally situated assertions used in the determination of quality and merit. In this rejoinder to Bigert, Kühhirt, and Van Lanker's (2026) reply to our 2024 article in Sociological Science, we reiterate the implications of these contrasting theoretical stances for the interpretation of NBA player awards. We restate our argument that the contrast between All-Star and All-NBA awards provides the theoretical traction needed to distinguish objective bias from culturally endogenous status mechanisms in cumulative status advantage. The analysis supports our broader claim that cultural/symbolic interpretations of status are better suited for explaining the endogeneity and stratification that define status contests in varied contexts.

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We read the reply by Biegert, Kühhirt, and Van Lanker (2026) to our 2024 article in Sociological Science with great interest, and we appreciate the authors' elaborate and thorough engagement with our arguments and analyses. The reply raises a number of important points that highlight key aspects of our analyses and help elucidate our core theoretical arguments. The critiques Biegert et al. put forward in their reply serve to clarify an important distinction between *rational/economic* and *symbolic/cultural* models of status that motivated our original article (McMahan and Shor 2024). That is, although Biegert et al. treat status assessments as socially tainted measurements of objective quality, we treat these assessments as legitimate culturally and symbolically situated assertions that individuals use to determine quality and merit. This theoretical contrast underlies the main critiques by Biegert et al., as it also entails substantial analytical and methodological differences. In this rejoinder, we address Biegert et al.'s principal critiques while also advancing a broader argument for the interpretation of status orders.

Cumulative Status Advantage

The first major critique in Biegert et al.'s reply is directed at our focus on long-term, cumulative effects of NBA awards and the minimal attention we pay to the influence of single-season lagged awards. The authors are correct that our analysis in the 2024 article (McMahan and Shor 2024) focuses almost exclusively on *cumulative* status advantage. Indeed, we wish to reiterate that our principal intervention relates to the cumulative aspects of status attribution and that this is by design. This

misunderstanding is at the root of many of Biegert et al.'s detailed critiques, so it is important to elaborate upon the significance of these cumulative mechanisms to our (and to Biegert et al.'s) arguments.

Cumulative status effects are the core focus of the theory and modeling choices appearing in Biegert et al.'s original piece in the American Sociological Review, which, as the authors state that their analysis, "highlights the role of cumulative status bias in the feedback loop that leads from initial status allocation to status confirmation" (Biegert, Kühhirt, and Van Lanker 2023, P. 189). In line with this statement, Biegert et al.'s (2023) analysis distinguishes three mechanisms of "status-induced confirmation of status hierarchies": (1) *Matthew effect*, (2) *status bias*, and (3) *cumulative status bias* (P. 195). In their account, the first two mechanisms allow the previous season's awards to influence a given season's award decisions, either through induced improvements to players' performance or through social mechanisms unrelated to performance. Such immediate path dependency is well established in the existing literature on status in a wide variety of fields (Sauder, Lynn, and Podolny 2012), and it is an important part of any explanation of status assessment.

The third mechanism that Biegert et al. (2023) include, *cumulative status bias*, accounts for the influence of accumulated status signals "*over and above* the bias induced from a directly preceding status signal" (P. 195; emphasis ours). In their reply, Biegert et al. (2026) refer to all three of these mechanisms as *cumulative status bias*, describing the cumulative effect as the "second component of cumulative status bias" (Biegert et al. 2026, P. 4). We are confused by the inconsistency of this statement because in their 2023 article the authors explicitly defined *cumulative status bias* as distinct from the other two mechanisms. This emphasis is articulated throughout the article, but most plainly in their hypothesis labeled *cumulative status bias*: "Having been an NBA All-Star in prior years increases the likelihood of becoming an NBA All-Star this year *beyond having been an All-Star in the previous year*, ceteris paribus" (Biegert et al. 2023, P. 197; emphasis ours).

Our 2024 article did not aim to refute the role of the Matthew effect on NBA awards, nor to make a case against path dependency from early awards in players' careers. Instead, the argument we put forth was oriented toward the mechanisms through which established status orders emerge and are maintained. We did not argue that identity-focused status processes, such as reputation and celebrity, play no part in what Biegert et al. term *status bias*. We suggest that these status processes may often be overshadowed by the currency of very recent public awards. Nor do we dispute the statement that "the repeated assignment of distinct status and the resulting entrenchment of status hierarchies deviate from a purely merit-based status hierarchy" (Biegert et al. 2026, P. 2). Indeed, we wholeheartedly agree that NBA All-Star nominations can deviate dramatically from a definition of merit that narrowly considers on-court performance.

Our argument instead emphasizes two key issues. First, we question the assumption that established status orders are necessarily oriented only toward skills-based merit. Second, we argue that the accumulation of status over time and its effect on status attribution do not necessarily represent a deviation from some kind of a "pure" status process. The combination of these two issues is the principal reason that mechanisms such as the Matthew effect lead to path dependency and

entrenched status orders. Once a player's reputation as high status is established through initial cues, including but not limited to early awards, that reputation itself can legitimize future award selections (Correll et al. 2017).

Our analysis focuses on the cumulative effects of award selection because the performance-agnostic status processes we hope to highlight are most saliently realized in these cumulative effects. Crucially, the "celebrity" that influences status recognition need not be based solely on previous performance and awards. A player may be well known when they start their career, or they may leverage their career in the league to gain recognition in other domains such as television and movies (e.g., Shaquille O'Neal and Lebron James), entrepreneurship (e.g., Russell Westbrook's "Honor the gift" brand), or corporate sponsorship (e.g., Michael Jordan's decades-long relationship with Nike).

We claim that one of the underlying "qualities" that status commonly reflects is status itself. Being already established as a prominent member of a field often merits status recognition on its own. Touting a person as "widely recognized" or "celebrated" can be enough to justify an attribution of high status (Goode 1978; Gould 2002; van de Rijt et al. 2013). In public, high-profile domains such as professional sports, established prominence is a legitimate justification for status recognition (Correll et al. 2017; Meyer and Gamson 1995). Whether it is the result of an accumulated Matthew effect and early advantage or of circumstances exogenous to the field, "celebrity" is frequently celebrated on its own. Or as some have termed it, a celebrity is someone who is "famous for being famous" (Halberstam 1984; for the original notion of "a person who is known for his well-knownnes," see Boorstin 1962). Certainly, this kind of *status for status' sake* is not often the only consideration in status contests, but it is an acknowledged driver of status attribution and among the core processes driving persistence of status orders (Espeland, Sauder, and Espeland 2016; Martin 2009). When Biegert et al. frame this kind of status endogeneity (not to be confused with the uncertainty-based endogeneity discussed in the literature on socially endogenous inference) as a divergence from the "real" status hierarchy, they underestimate the far-reaching downstream impact that those at the top of a status order can have on their field.

In our 2024 article, we made the case that NBA All-Star selections are an example of a high-profile recognition in which considerations outside of narrowly defined performance are legitimate. Yet, in their response to us, Biegert et al. (2026) state that "the claim that these considerations are legitimate and in the spirit of the All-Star election remains unsubstantiated throughout" (P. 10). This statement fails to seriously engage with our article and arguments. We dedicate three pages of discussion (McMahan and Shor 2024, PP. 694−697) to evidence of public non-performance criteria being used for All-Star selections. Indeed, we provided numerous examples of sports journalists focusing on non-performance criteria and stating that these are crucial and of instances where non-performance criteria were publicly celebrated. We also provided a thorough discussion of the history of the contest, and even explicit statements by the NBA commissioner readily admitting that he used non-performance criteria in the selection. To these, we added several in-depth examples of players who were clearly selected in various years based on non-performance criteria. These selections could mostly be justified only by referring to other criteria,

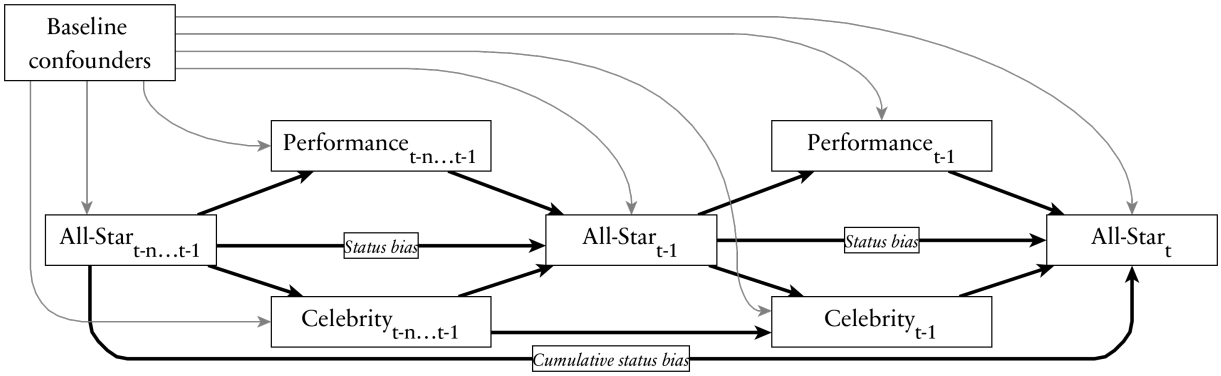

Figure 1: Directed graph illustrating the interacting roles of celebrity and All-Star selections.

such as an attractive game style, general public popularity, or a tribute to an illustrious career coming to an end, but they were typically not viewed as outlandish or outrageous by the larger NBA community.

Our position may be clarified through a formal causal sketch. Figure 1 simplifies and adapts figure 4 from Biegert et al. (2023), adding nodes for "celebrity", which here is meant to illustrate the role of one type of status-for-status characteristic.[1] Although this sort of causal diagram necessarily glosses over many subtleties of the attribution process, the formal representation of the role of celebrity illustrates certain key points. First, celebrity status at a certain time can directly influence future celebrity status. This dynamic is perhaps most apparent in arts and cultural domains (social media influencers, high-profile artists, etc.) but is certainly also the case in popular professional sports such as the NBA. People may know and talk about stars simply *because* they are well known (Boorstin 1962; Cowen 2000).

The path dependency induced by awards is undoubtedly an important component of status differentiation (Gould 2002), but the dynamics of what Martin (2009) terms *popularity tournaments* allow differentiation without any underlying quality difference (chap. 2). A crucial idea illustrated in Figure 1 is that the direct causal pathway from accumulated All-Star nominations (All-Star$_{t-n\ldots t-1}$) to the current season's selection (All-Star$_t$), which Biegert et al. (2023) theorize as *cumulative status bias* is analytically indistinguishable from a path that is mediated by player celebrity.[2] In other words, what Biegert et al. identify as *cumulative status bias* is in fact a black-box predictor that encompasses and conflates anything not accounted for by performance or situation variables at any time in a player's career. Therefore, we focus our intervention on the cumulative effects of Biegert et al.'s model because celebrity effects and other endogenous, identity-based features we address are hidden within the cumulative predictor in their analysis and thus treated as status bias.

Our Analytical Strategy

The analysis we presented in McMahan and Shor (2024) was by design indirect. Without finding clear (and exhaustive) measures of identity-based characteristics that we emphasize–a daunting proposition to say the least–there is no way to empirically differentiate them from what Biegert et al. (2023) interpret as cumulative

status bias. As an alternative, our analysis sought to establish the empirical *plausibility* of personality, popularity, and legacy as socially legitimate components of All-Star selection. We approached this through two sets of analyses.[3] First, we tried to rule out the possibility that the *cumulative status bias* identified by Biegert et al. is the result of players' performance being incompletely or imprecisely measured. If performance fully accounted for the appearance of cumulative status advantage, it would have rendered *both* our own and Biegert et al.'s explanations of that advantage moot. Second, we performed a parallel analysis assessing the cumulative effects of All-NBA (rather than All-Star) selections on future assessments, drawing on the differences in process and history between the competitions to lend credence to our explanation of status entrenchment. Bieger et al. (2026) critiqued both stages of our analysis: (1) they argued that our addition of further performance measures was inappropriate, and (2) they suggested that our comparison to All-NBA awards did not support our conclusions. Below, we address both of these critiques.

Performance Does Not Explain the Cumulative Effects of All-Star Selections

Biegert et al. (2026) characterize our first set of analyses as an attempt to "explain away" their findings (P. 6). However, this is a significant mischaracterization of our approach. To reiterate, our *own* argument would have been completely undermined had we been able to fully account for the accumulated impact of All-Star nominations with performance measures. Instead, the aim of our first analysis was to ensure that the cumulative status advantage of the All-Star elections remained even when a wider and more complete set of performance indicators were included.[4] We believe that this misrepresentation of our efforts and approach is closely tied to Biegert et al.'s misunderstanding of the differentiation between cumulative and lagged effects discussed above. In our models, the explanatory variable of interest is the one Biegert et al. refer to as *cumulative status bias*. Although measures of earlier performance or situation are mediators of the relationship between award selections in the previous season and the selection in the current season, the role of these measures in the causal model is less straightforward when their cumulative influence is being modeled and they are therefore measured at multiple time points.

Biegert et al. (2026) also had concerns with the temporal alignment of the measures of players' performance and situation in our model. Some of these concerns are clearly overstated and mischaracterize our models. For instance, they failed to acknowledge that we calculated a weighted average for advanced statistics such as Box Plus/Minus (BPM) and Defensive Box Plus/Minus (DBPM) that were measured on complete seasons to partially account for mid-season All-Star voting. Other concerns are valid, particularly the point about the different timing of All-Star and All-NBA. Trying to keep the models consistent and comparable across the two different outcome variables, we indeed neglected to recalculate variables to match the later-season decision around All-NBA. However, while we agree that this is a better modeling approach, Biegert et al.'s re-analysis shows that it does not meaningfully influence the cumulative effect of awards, which stands at the heart of our argument (see Table 1 in Biegert et al. 2026).[5]

Accounting for the Differences between All-Star Selections and All-NBA Awards

Biegert et al.'s (2026) final set of critiques engages with the second part of our analytical strategy, which centers on a comparison of cumulative status advantage in the NBA's All-Star selections and All-NBA awards. To reiterate, the aim of this comparison was to establish whether accumulated award selections lose their saliency when we consider a more overtly skills-focused contest such as the All-NBA selections, which also potentially impacts players' salaries.[6] If, as we show, cumulative All-NBA awards do not significantly predict future awards, then it is reasonable to conclude that status attribution based on purely on-court performance is possible. This suggests that the cumulative effect identified by Biegert et al. in All-Star awards may not be based purely on biased perceptions among voters. However, to take a lack of cumulative effects in All-NBA selections as evidence of non-performance considerations in the All-Star contest, we must be able to establish two underlying claims: (1) that non-performance factors such as celebrity or legacy are perceived as more legitimate criteria in selections for the All-Star game than in All-NBA selections; and (2) that the different impact of cumulative advantage between the two awards is not being driven only by increased uncertainty among All-Star (as compared to All-NBA) voters. Biegert et al. assert that we were unable to establish these two claims. However, we believe that this assertion is based on both misunderstanding and misrepresenting our key arguments.

In their critique, Biegert et al. (2026) simultaneously paint two contradictory pictures of the relationship between All-Star selections and All-NBA awards. Their argument implicitly asserts that the awards share the same meritocratic ideal focused on identifying the best-performing players in the league and that the meaning of "best-performing" is the same in both contexts. This similarity, they argue, justifies the use of performance metrics as the only *unbiased* influence on selection for both awards. However, at the same time, the authors emphasize that All-NBA awards reflect a "different status hierarchy with different characteristics" (Biegert et al. 2026, P. 12). We find these two representations of NBA awards difficult to rectify.

Attempting to explain how the two contests can be simultaneously attuned to the same and different ideals, Biegert et al. suggest that All-NBA voters may "be more aware of what meritocratic achievements to base their selections on" (2026, P. 13) than those voting for the All-Star game. Although information and observability around performance is an important issue to consider (see more on that below), what Biegert et al. suggest here is a different and far more theoretically consequential idea. They suggest that one reason All-Star selections are more sensitive to cumulative effects is that voters are confused about what kinds of achievements they are supposed to be rewarding and thus often make judgements based on the "wrong" criteria (i.e., anything that is not pure measurable performance statistics). This theory of status orders is based on there being some positive, objective criteria that are independent of the criteria that people actually use when assessing that order. However, we see status much differently; status orders are constructed from the judgments people make, and if All-Star voters base their selections on non-performance achievements such as celebrity, personality, or pedigree, then *those achievements become the very basis of the status order*, not a deviation from it. In other words, voters are not "confused" or "misguided" when selecting an aging

Hall-of-Famer in decline to a final tribute All-Star game. Instead, they use different judgement criteria, which are neither "wrong" nor "illegitimate." To conclude, we agree with Biegert et al. that All-Star selections represent a different status order with different criteria for deservedness. However, we disagree with their conclusion that these deviations in criteria are sufficient to identify cumulative bias.

Putting aside our contrasting definitions of status for the moment, we would like to address the question of information asymmetry between All-Star and All-NBA voters. Biegert et al. (2026) make a compelling claim that the sports journalists and other professionals who vote on All-NBA awards are likely better informed about players' abilities than the fans whose votes are used to decide who is selected for the All-Star game before the system has been changed in recent years. In fact, we raised this very point as a possible explanation in our own article and find it perplexing that Biegert et al. do not acknowledge or engage with this prominent aspect of our analysis. Lack of complete information is a well-established mechanism of status reinforcement, and voters with limited information resources may well look to recent awards as a proxy for recent on-court performance. Indeed, it is likely that this type of uncertainty is a major driver of the short-term status bias identified by Biegert et al. (2023) in their original analysis.

However, as we discuss in our (2024) analysis, there are strong reasons to believe that information uncertainty among voters is not the major driving force behind the *cumulative* status advantage in All-Star elections. Complementary analyses performed by Biegert et al. (2023) themselves compared the voting behavior of fans versus coaches as All-Star voters, using a clever Heckman correction model to account for the sequence of starting versus reserve rosters (P. 210). For coaches, arguably the best-informed participants in NBA All-Star selections, the influence of previous awards was dramatically *stronger* than for fans. Biegert et al. explained this finding as an example of "third-order inference" (Correll et al. 2017). Although we think that this is a plausible explanation, especially in the context of contests so heavily and publicly discussed as the NBA All-Star teams (Benjamin and Podolny 1999; Bourdieu 1984; Espeland et al. 2016), we maintain that it does not support an interpretation of cumulative advantage as bias.

If coaches are using their privileged information to align their decisions with dominant popular beliefs about what qualifies a player for All-Star status, and if that alignment diverges from a purely performance-based assessment, then the most obvious conclusion is that dominant popular belief does not hold recent performance indicators to be the only quality that merits an All-Star selection. Coaches should have better-informed assessments of which players currently have the most "buzz" around them, which players will create the most exciting All-Star performance, or which will induce the most response from the media–precisely the kinds of identity-based characteristics that we argue are part of All-Star considerations. This evidence reinforces our main claim that All-Star awards are indicators of a broad-based, multivalent status ideal, whereas All-NBA awards are more narrowly focused on measurable performance indicators. If we agree that NBA coaches are at least as well informed about NBA players' skills, careers, current performance, and publicity as are sports journalists (who are the ones making all-NBA selections), then the contrasting influence of cumulative All-Star versus All-NBA awards on

voting is most easily explained as a difference in the meritocratic focus of the two status orders.

Concluding Remarks

We wish to again thank Biegert et al. (2026) for their critical engagement with our 2024 Sociological Science article. This exchange has been very productive in clarifying many of the empirical and theoretical issues with which we are all engaged. We conclude that the bulk of Biegert et al.'s critiques of our analysis–both methodological[7] and substantive–are resolved through a clearer differentiation of cumulative and immediate status advantage. Biegert et al. might argue that we overemphasize the distinction between the lagged and cumulative effects of status. However, we hope that this rejoinder underscores why we agree with one of the central takeaways from their 2023 analysis: the mechanisms of cumulative status advantage differ significantly from those used to explain the Matthew effect and proximal status bias. Information ambiguities and status-endogenous investment are well suited to explain season-to-season award streaks, and, to the degree that these mechanisms are not directly attributable to increases in performance and visibility, *bias* is a reasonable frame for describing them.

However, to suggest that these same mechanisms explain the influence of entrenched long-term prestige glosses over the complexities of status construction. Did Kobe Bryant make the All-Star team in 2015 because voters resolved uncertainties about his performance by tallying nearly two decades of awards? Or did those past awards contribute to a general aura of notoriety and respect that made his status self-apparent and the selection a worthy and justified one in the eyes of most NBA fans, coaches, journalists, and even the NBA commissioner? We find the latter explanation both theoretically better situated and empirically more plausible.

The contrast between our stance and that of Biegert et al. may come down to a theoretical preference for an *economic* versus a *cultural/symbolic* view of status. Biegert et al., in line with much of the organizational literature, view status assessment as a fundamentally rational endeavor to ascertain quality in the face of imperfect information–"a subjective proxy for an objective measure of relative superiority" (Freeland and Hoey 2018). In our view, status plays a much broader role: status hierarchies are a ubiquitous symbolic feature of social fields that reflect the cognitive (Carley 1991; Ridgeway and Correll 2006), structural (Gould 2002; Martin 2009; Rytina 2020), and cultural (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont 1992; Sauder 2005) tendency toward stratification, even in the absence of a meaningful notion of "productivity" on which to base social differentiation. Prestigious recognitions such as NBA All-Star selection are undoubtedly linked to players' on-court contributions, but that link is realized through a host of interactional processes that determine players' significance to the league, the media, and fans. Our aim is not to deny the role of status in people's assessment of quality but rather to contextualize that role as fundamentally mediated by cultural processes.

What, then, are the implications of our stance? Biegert et al. assert that an acknowledgment of status as a multivalent hierarchy supports the kind of unfair stratification common in different fields. They give an example of scientific grant

competitions that may give unduly inflated assessments to applicants with previous funding success, accusing us of providing "carte blanche" to defenses of inegalitarian reward systems. Needless to say, we reject such claims. An acknowledgment that status distinctions are an inherently problematic indicator of merit puts social scientists in a better position to interrogate and critique the purportedly meritocratic hierarchies that shape so many fields. There is no absolute *correct* or *objective* set of criteria that funding agencies, media critics, awards committees, or contest judges can adhere to when trying to ensure meritocratic assessments, because the process of establishing which criteria count as "merit" cannot be separated from the social and cultural symbolic factors that underlie that identification. To assume that it is self-evident which criteria are "fair" and which are not ignores the stakes of that distinction. As social scientists, we must disillusion ourselves of the presumptive notion that we can discern categorically which qualities *ought* to be rewarded in a field. Instead, we should try to explain the ways that certain qualities gain legitimacy over others as bases of apparently meritocratic stratification.

Notes

1 To improve legibility, the nodes for the "situation" variables have been removed. Structurally (but not conceptually), these play the same role as the "performance" variables, so for completeness one can consider the "performance" nodes to also include "situation" variables. We also omit potentially justifiable links between celebrity and performance in an effort to simplify the figure and focus the discussion, as they would not affect the core of our argument.

2 Biegert et al. discuss the possibility that some unobserved factor ("U3") could play this role. They purport to include some secondary analysis to try to rule this out, but the analyses they refer to (one predicting first All-Star selections, one based on regression discontinuity analysis, and one supplementing performance measures) are unable to speak to the cumulative effects of nominations. For this reason, the authors conclude that "because we cannot entirely exclude that other mechanisms induced by All-Star status affect our outcome (U3) . . . we refrain from using strong causal language" (Biegert et al. 2023, P. 202).

3 These two analyses built upon our replication of the analysis from Biegert et al. (2023), which involved substantial corrections detailed in McMahan and Shor (2024), which Bieger et al. (2026) only acknowledge casually in a footnote. We focus on only the subsequent two analytical stages because the corrections are not relevant to the current discussion.

4 Still, we appreciate the points raised by Biegert et al. (2026) about confounding versus mediation, and we acknowledge some imprecision in our exposition, although we do not believe this substantially affects our analyses or interpretations.

5 Because All-NBA decisions are made later than the All-Star voting, around which our variables were calculated, the misalignment leads to the omission of players' performances in the months immediately before the selection. Although this omission affects the estimates of the lagged-award coefficients ($t-1$), the impact on the cumulative coefficient ($t-n \ldots t-1$) is minuscule. Biegert et al.'s results confirm this intuition: correcting the measurement windows significantly increases the estimated effect of immediately preceding awards on All-NBA selections, but the change makes virtually no difference for the estimated effect of accumulated awards on which our argument relies.

6 Biegert et al. (2026) do make an important observation about the differences in statistical power between the two analyses. The smaller number of All-NBA awardees (15 vs. 24 annual All Star selections) indeed reduces statistical power for estimating effects.

7 Most notably, the refutations of our empirical results that Biegert et al. cite all support our claim that cumulative status effects are prominent in All-Star contests and insignificant in All-NBA contests. The results they emphasize focus on the single-season lagged effects, which we do not contest.

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