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Pros and cons of affirmative action

Affirmative action policies discriminating in favour of members of disadvantaged groups have become widespread in countries worldwide since the 1960s, but the “very phrase is vague”, said *The Economist*. Then president John F. Kennedy signed an executive order in 1965 that required US government employers to “hire without regard to race, religion and national origin”. Yet since then, said the magazine, affirmative action “has come to mean more or less the opposite: giving preference to people because they belong to a particular race, religion, caste or sex”. Supporters argue that such policies – also known as positive discrimination – level the playing field for historically disadvantaged groups, but critics claim they unfairly discriminate and should be illegal.



1

“Since nine states already have bans on affirmative action, it’s easy to know what will happen if affirmative action is outlawed,” said Natasha Warikoo, a Tufts University professor who studies racial equity in education, in an article on *The Conversation*. Studies into college enrolment in those states indicate that the number of black, Hispanic and native American undergraduate students will decline in the long term.

Universities may lose out from ditching such policies, said Jennifer Lee, a professor in the Department of Sociology at Columbia University in New York. If the Supreme Court decides to end affirmative action, the result will ultimately “be institutions that are less representative, less intellectually stimulating, and less equipped to serve an increasingly diverse America”, Lee warned in an article for *Science*.

2

Polls show that affirmative action policies have become increasingly accepted over time. Gallup polling found that general support in the US stood at between 47% to 50% between 2001 and 2005, before climbing to 54% in 2016 and then 61% in 2018. And a poll by Quinnipiac University in 2020 of more than 1,300 people found that two-thirds believed that discrimination against black people in the US was a serious problem.

“Americans are also solidly behind the broad concept of equal opportunity and improving the position of racial minorities in society – the underlying rationale for affirmative action,” said Gallop.

3

Somewhere along the decades, affirmative action “has lost its way”, said law experts Richard Sander and Stuart Taylor Jr. in *The Atlantic*. “The largest, most aggressive preferences are usually reserved for upper-middle-class minorities on many of whom they inflict significant academic harm,” they wrote, “whereas more modest policies that could help working-class and poor people of all races are given short shrift.”

“We want diverse stock traders, corporate-boardroom members, and tenured professors,” said Jay Caspian Kang in *The New Yorker*, but “it’s clear that what’s at stake isn’t a vision of social and racial justice that would ameliorate inequalities for a broad swath of people but, rather, a fight for spots in the elite ranks of society”.

4

Advocates often argue that affirmative action is necessary to correct historical injustice and that discrimination against some groups is so pervasive that it can only be corrected with reverse discrimination.

But “critics of affirmative action argue that two wrongs do not make a right; that treating different racial groups differently will entrench racial antagonism and that societies should aim to be colour-blind”, said *The Economist*.

5

High-profile companies including Apple, Starbucks and Ikea joined together to file briefs at the Supreme Court arguing that racial diversity improves decision-making at their companies, said NPR’s Mary Louise Kelly on daily news show *All Things Considered*. Similarly, “a bunch of big law firms also weighed in on the value of a racially diverse pool of talent coming in to them”.

6

Critics question whether the costs associated with affirmative action policies, such as grants and scholarships to help access higher education, could be better spent improving opportunities for a wider demographic. “The staggering cost of the diversity bureaucracy contributes to the rising cost of tuition,” said Peter Kirsanow, a member of the US Commission on Civil Rights, in a 2011 article for *National Review*. “Consequently, all students (or their guarantors/creditors) are paying more money/incurred greater debt so that preferred minority students will have a higher probability of flunking out.”

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