

# Affirmative action Should affirmative action be scrapped?

Moderator

Ana Lankes, *The Economist*

On August 30th America's Department of Justice issued a statement in support of students who are suing Harvard University over affirmative-action policies they say discriminate against Asian-American applicants. The students claim that the university has systematically chosen less qualified applicants of other races over more qualified Asian-Americans. The case reflects deep-seated divisions over affirmative action in America, where the debate revolves mainly around access to education.

Affirmative action describes the practice of giving preference to members of certain groups, for example in terms of university admissions, government contracts or jobs, often in an attempt to rectify historical discrimination or persecution. In India the state uses quotas for dalits, who are the country's lowest caste group, in government jobs and public universities. In Malaysia, affirmative action works in favour of Malays, who have historically been poorer than their Chinese and Indian counterparts. And Norway, Italy and Belgium are among countries that require a certain percentage of board members at listed companies to be women.

Advocates for affirmative action believe that such policies are needed to tackle deep-seated prejudices and systemic discrimination. Opponents contend that such an approach is unfair, since two wrongs don't make a right, and does more harm than good, as *The Economist* has [argued](#). Another group believes that some people deserve a leg-up but disagree on the grounds for qualification.

It's a complicated, fraught topic. To debate it we have invited Ella Whelan, a journalist, to argue in favour of the motion, and Julia Sass Rubin, an academic, to argue against. Opening statements appear today, rebuttals are on Wednesday, and closing arguments are published on Friday. Voting is open until Sunday evening. Join the debate by leaving comments here or on social media, using the hashtag #OpenFuture.

## Yes

Ella Whelan, *Spiked* magazine

If I had been asked to write this statement because I was a woman, and because *The Economist* needed to make up its quota of female writers that week, I'd like to think that I would decline. Not because I don't want the job, but because any pride I have in my work and my ability would stop me from doing so.

Affirmative action is an insult. It suggests that individuals from certain backgrounds need a leg up to be able to achieve what the rest of society does with ease. Supporters claim that it's a necessary evil, that until the world is a better place we need affirmative action to give minorities a space at the table. No one wants to be nominated for an award or hired for a job on the basis of their skin colour, sexuality or gender. However, until society is less intrinsically male, pale and stale, certain people should take all the help they can get.

There are two problems with this view. The first is that supporters of affirmative action imagine that the world is stacked against them, and that the barriers life might throw at them are too difficult to face. As a woman, I'm often told that I might find it harder to speak up in meetings, or might shy away from asking for job opportunities because I'm too naturally polite. Anyone who has met me knows that isn't quite the case. Despite the fact that women are excelling in all aspects of public life (even out-earning men in their twenties), I'm still considered in need of charity because of my gender.

The second problem is that affirmative action underestimates how far society has come from the days of real and ugly discrimination. Fifty years ago, when life was a lot more fraught with inequality, it wasn't handouts or leg-ups that won people their freedom, but direct action, collective organisation and radical demands for equality. When the Bristol Omnibus Company refused to employ black or Asian workers in 1963, a group of young West African and West Indian men organised a protest which boycotted the buses until they ended the discriminatory practice. As a result, the Race Relations Act was passed in Britain in 1965 which stopped racial discrimination in public places, later followed by a further act in 1968 to cover housing and employment. Likewise, the 1968 Dagenham female strikers at Ford didn't need affirmative action to win fair pay for their work, they went on strike until they won it for themselves.

We no longer live in a systematically racist, sexist, discriminatory society. We have those who fought past struggles for freedom to thank for that. And those battles that some of us still face will not be won with calls for special treatment of minorities. Supporters of affirmative action forget the power of workers, and individuals, to stand up for their rights and demand their equality. Crying for pity quotas from the big boss won't get us anywhere. If we want to be treated like equals, we must recognise affirmative action for what it is: lazy tokenism.

*Ella Whelan is a columnist for spiked magazine and author of What Women Want: Fun, Freedom and an End to Feminism.*

## **No**

Julia Rubin, Rutgers University

Affirmative action refers to efforts to provide equal opportunity in educational admissions, employment hiring, and promotion to those of different races, ethnicities, income levels and physical abilities. Affirmative action is necessary because our society is not meritocratic. In fact, preferential treatment based on income, race and ethnicity is the norm.

I write this as someone who has benefitted from those privileges. As a white, upper-middle class woman from a highly-educated family, I never had to worry about whether I would have enough to eat, a safe place to live, or would be able to see a doctor when ill. I never attended underfunded schools with unprepared teachers, inadequate textbooks, unsafe or dilapidated facilities, and fellow students who were hungry, traumatized by violence, or exhausted from holding down two jobs to help feed their families. My parents had the knowledge, time and ability to help me with my schoolwork or to open doors by connecting me with others in their social networks. Teachers and employers never assumed that I was not

smart or competent because of my skin color, ethnicity or accent. These privileges provided me with many advantages over others who worked just as hard or perhaps even harder than I did but were not as fortunate.

In America, we could address such inequities through public policies, as we did for a short time in the 1960s and 70s. But we are not. Instead, income inequality is increasing dramatically, further limiting access to opportunities. And because income is very unevenly distributed by race and ethnicity, growing income inequality is exacerbating America's already substantial racial and ethnic inequalities.

Affirmative action is also necessary because there is no "objective" way to compare candidates when admitting to universities or hiring for jobs. Supposedly meritocratic selection criteria actually reflect and reinforce our society's inequities and prejudices, giving tremendous advantages to those already at the top. For example, multiple studies have confirmed that standardised test scores mirror family educational attainment and income, and that job and admission interviews are subject to numerous perceptual biases that favour in-group candidates. Since those doing the selecting are likely to be from more privileged groups, that means others like them have an edge. Only by acknowledging these biases and inequities, and structuring selection to consciously address them, can we make access to opportunities even remotely equitable.

There are many reasons to support affirmative action. Diversity of experiences, cultures, and ideas brings immense benefits to classrooms and work environments. For me, however, the most compelling reason to support affirmative action is equity. As an upper-middle class white person, I have benefited from our society's de facto affirmative action for people like me. That is not right because the family you are born into should not dictate your life chances. I support affirmative action because I want the economic and demographic composition of an entering college class or a company's workforce to reflect the broader population from which it is drawn rather than being skewed by privilege. I support affirmative action because everyone in our very unequal society should have an equal opportunity to succeed.

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