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Race and Ethnicity in American Politics

ISSUE BRIEF TITLE: Affirmative Action and Socioeconomic Class

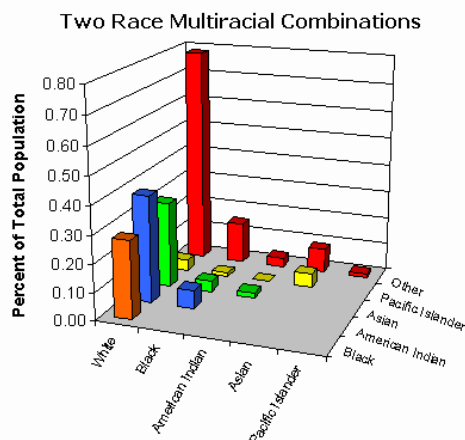
KEYWORDS: Affirmative action, underrepresented minorities, socioeconomic class, poverty level, education, multi-racial

DESCRIPTION: This brief will focus on affirmative action in the realm of education and will first address how current race based affirmative action policies are becoming more obsolete and why they are so controversial. Then, the brief will discuss the possibility of redefining what affirmative action in terms of socioeconomic status.

KEY POINTS:

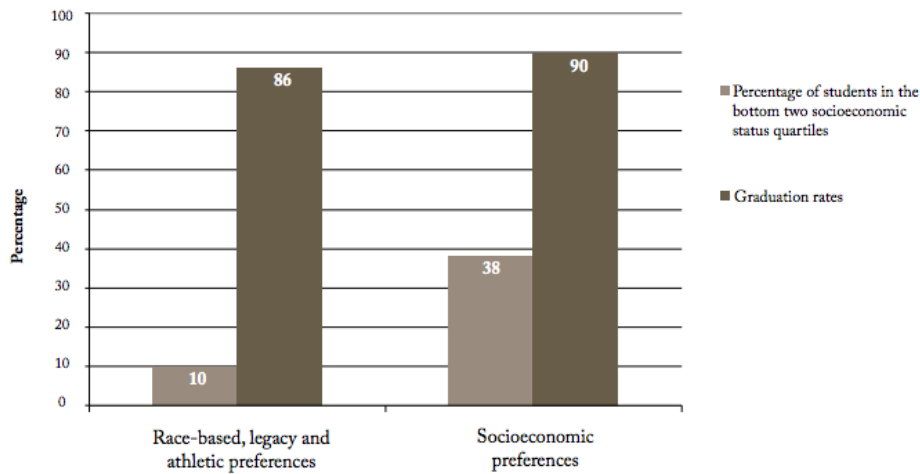
1. As the population is increasingly becoming more ethno-racially diverse, socioeconomic class-based affirmative action has been in the spotlight as a potential alternative to race based policies.
2. Critics of the current affirmative action policies argue it causes reverse discrimination and actually increases minority discrimination by discrediting true minority achievements.
3. There is a strong correlation between race and poverty, but people of similar financial situations and upbringings should not be treated differently based on their race.
4. Socioeconomic class based affirmative action would give preferential treatment to students from low-income families, regardless of their ethno-racial identity.
5. Poverty is caused by a vicious cycle that begins with poor education, which leads to difficulty in finding a job, and therefore decreasing the standard of living.

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Source: [http://www.censusscope.org/us/chart\\_multi.html](http://www.censusscope.org/us/chart_multi.html)

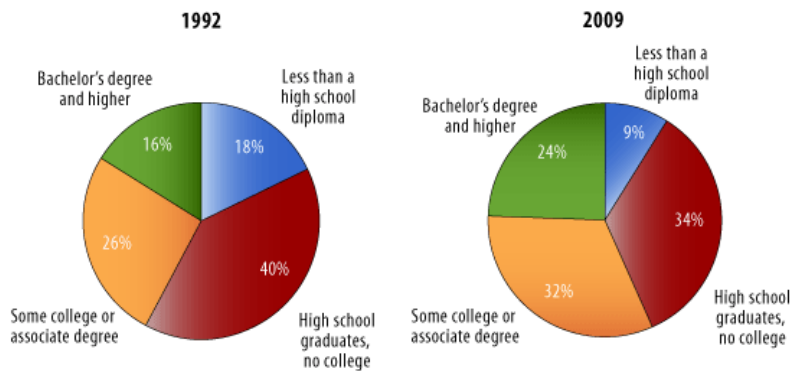
Figure 7. The Results of Socioeconomic Preferences versus Other Preferences



Source: <http://tcf.org/assets/downloads/tcf-abaa.pdf>

### Educational Attainment

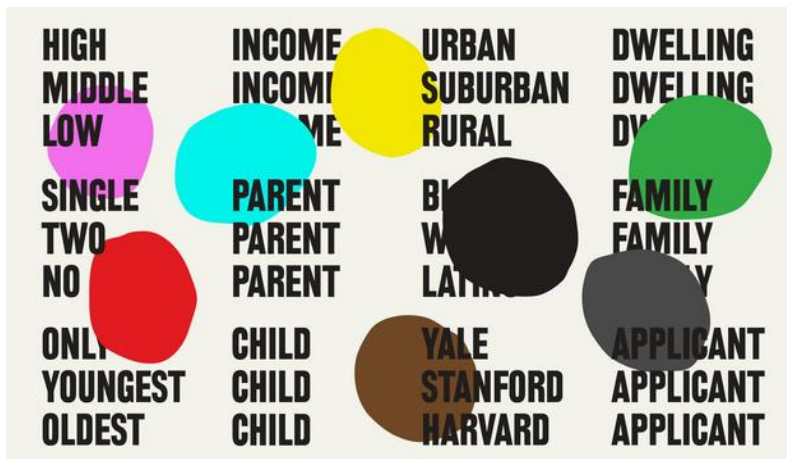
Educational attainment of blacks or African Americans in the labor force, 25 years and over



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

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Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, [bls.gov](http://bls.gov)



Source: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-10-31/a-harvard-man-s-critique-of-affirmative-action.html>

Today, affirmative action is defined as proactive efforts to improve employment or educational opportunities by taking into consideration race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in a manner that benefits the historically or presently underrepresented minority groups. The purposes of affirmative action are to remedy past discrimination or effects of past discrimination, increase minority representation, and increase minority groups' standard of living. But as the population is increasingly becoming more ethno-racially diverse, socioeconomic class-based affirmative action has been in the spotlight as a potential alternative to race based policies. This brief will focus on affirmative action in the realm of education and will first address how current race based affirmative action policies are becoming more obsolete and why they are so controversial. Then, the brief will discuss the possibility of redefining what affirmative action in terms of socioeconomic status.

Current affirmative action policies give preferential treatment to people who are of minority status. The idea behind affirmative action is to provide to members of minority groups opportunities they would otherwise not be able to attain. While race-based affirmative action does accomplish its main goal – diversify the student body – there is the complicated issue of students' ethno-racial identity. Data from the 2010 census show that 92% of people who reported multiple races provided exactly two races. Four main race combinations comprised three quarters of the multiple-race combinations, with each of those four groups consisting of white and one minority group.<sup>1</sup> As more and more people are identifying as multi-racial, who and/or what is to determine whether or not multi-racial students are members of an underrepresented minority or part of the majority?

Some critics of race-based policies in university admissions argue that this type of affirmative action leads to reverse discrimination and actually increases minority discrimination by discrediting true minority achievements. Race-based policies can lead to reverse discrimination by making it significantly more difficult for white students to be admitted. Since affirmative action lowers standards for minority students, many minority students do not feel that they have to work as hard as their white counterparts. This in turn discredits the hardworking white students and passes along the opportunities to minority students that do not have to work as hard. Along with that notion, race-based affirmative action may actually damage the perception of minorities in an academic setting. By having lower standards, many people may think that minority students' achievements are not as great as if they were to be achieved by their white counterparts.<sup>2</sup>

As the topic of race-based affirmative action becomes more controversial, experts of affirmative action have proposed affirmative action policies based on socioeconomic class. The main argument is that there is a strong correlation between race and poverty, but people of similar financial situations and upbringings should not be treated differently based on their race. Socioeconomic class based affirmative action would give preferential treatment to students from low-income families, regardless of their ethno-racial identity.<sup>3</sup>

While class based affirmative action may seem like the road that lies ahead, there are still many issues that need to be addressed prior to higher education. Poverty is caused by a vicious cycle that begins with poor education, which leads to difficulty in finding a job, and therefore decreasing the standard of living. Research shows that children from lower socioeconomic class households and communities

develop academic skills slower than children from higher socioeconomic classes. Inadequate education and skills eventually leads to increases in dropout rates, therefore perpetuating the relationship between low socioeconomic class and poor education.<sup>4</sup>

Related to these fundamental problems present in low-income students is the theory labeled as “mismatch.” This refers to the idea that affirmative action may actually hurt minority students by placing them at schools in which they fall below the median level of ability and as a result, having a tougher time in school. This argument is not saying minority students should not attend top universities, but addresses the potential harm for students attending a school where the usual academic qualifications are a lot higher than the minority qualifications they needed to meet in order for admission.<sup>5</sup>

As the U.S. population becomes increasingly ethno-racially diverse, the subject of race-based affirmative action becomes increasingly controversial. Despite the opportunities affirmative action has provided for many people from underrepresented minorities, there is still a large divide between minority groups and the majority. People from the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder are still suffering with low education attainment rates and poor standards of living. There is still a lot of room for progress that needs to be made regarding underrepresented minorities and their role in America’s society. A possible to decrease the gap is through class-based affirmative action, where people from low-income backgrounds get preferential treatment, regardless of race. Whether or not the U.S. is actually heading towards a newly defined affirmative action is unfortunately still unknown.

#### WORKS CITED:

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3. <http://www.npr.org/2012/10/09/162578525/weighing-alternatives-to-affirmative-action>
4. <http://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/factsheet-education.aspx>
5. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/opinion/sunday/does-affirmative-action-do-what-it-should.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

#### RELEVANT WEBSITES:

1. [http://www.civilrights.org/equal-opportunity/fact-sheets/fact\\_sheet\\_packet.pdf](http://www.civilrights.org/equal-opportunity/fact-sheets/fact_sheet_packet.pdf)
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3. <http://tcf.org/assets/downloads/tcf-abaa.pdf>
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