

Affirmative Action: Why Do Whites Oppose It, And Will It Play A Role In November?

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Recent developments indicate that opinions about racial preference programs will play a key role in Campaign '96. Several current and former candidates for the 1996 Republican presidential nomination have called for ending most affirmative action programs, which directly conflicts with President Clinton's position on the subject.

In this article, we explore two facets of public opinion about affirmative action. First, we analyze the factors that shape attitudes about racial preference policies in the marketplace, paying particular attention to whites' feelings about blacks as well as their individualistic vs. collectivistic orientations. Second, we assess the potential impact of attitudes about affirmative action on voters in the upcoming presidential election.

Opinions about Affirmative Action

Several assumptions guide previous analyses of affirmative action's emergence as a potentially important campaign issue. First, most of the anger directed at racial preference policies allegedly stems from "angry white men" who sense they are losing their accustomed privileged position in society.¹ Second, opposition to affirmative action is said to arise out of whites' economic insecurities.² Third, some attribute white opposition to pure and simple racism.³

We, however, suspect that many Americans oppose affirmative action programs because they believe racial preferences violate individual rights. Seymour Martin Lipset claims that tension between two core values—egalitarianism and individualism—has long characterized American society.⁴ As Everett Ladd notes, "Like so much of

our socio-political value system, the idea of equality in the United States has been shaped by one overriding feature—a notably insistent individualism."⁵

Previous studies of public opinion regarding affirmative action have found that Americans' attitudes differ from one facet of this complex topic to another.⁶ As Citrin notes, "Where specific policies are concerned, it is clear that

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'soft' opportunity-enhancing approaches are accepted, while 'hard' preference-giving programs are widely unpopular."⁷ We focus on what appears to be the most controversial aspect of affirmative action: policies that establish racial preferences in hiring and promotion. These programs should be most likely to have an effect on election day if affirmative action is, indeed, an important campaign issue.

Specifically, we look at an item introduced on the 1986 National Election Study and included on each NES since: "Some people say that because of past discrimination, blacks should be given preference in hiring and promotion. Others say that such preference in hiring and promotion is wrong because it gives blacks advantages they haven't earned."⁸ The question asks respon-

dents to agree or disagree with racial preferences in the job market, and if they favor/oppose racial preferences "strongly" or "not strongly."

National Election Studies between 1986 and 1994, as well as Ohio statewide polls⁹ in 1995 and 1996, show that although a person's gender and economic insecurities do not affect opinions about racial preferences in the marketplace, one's race matters a very great deal. Majorities or near-majorities of blacks favoring affirmative action face even larger majorities of whites in opposition.¹⁰

The Ohio Poll conducted in mid-March 1996 illustrates the size of the gap between white and black opinions on affirmative action. (The question was the same as the NES item, with one exception: respondents who initially replied "don't know" or "not sure" were asked if they leaned toward favoring or opposing racial preferences.) Almost half (49%) of blacks favored affirmative action in the work force, 38% favored strongly and 11% either favored not strongly or leaned toward favoring. Twenty-two percent of blacks were strongly opposed, while 19% either opposed racial preferences not strongly or leaned toward opposition.

By contrast, nearly four-fifths of white Ohioans opposed affirmative action in hiring and promotion; 55% were strongly opposed and 24% said either that they opposed racial preferences not strongly or leaned toward opposing. Five percent of whites were strongly in favor of racial preferences, while 7% either favored them not strongly or leaned toward favoring them.

Why are such large percentages of whites opposed to racial preferences in the marketplace? We first explore the hypothesis that racism explains whites' opinions about affirmative action.

Is Racism the Explanation?

Racism is difficult to define and to measure. In order to tap these attitudes,

we combined four questions plumbing negative views of blacks that appear on the NES into an "Opinions about Blacks" Index.¹¹ Figure 1 depicts the relationships between whites' opinions about affirmative action and their scores on the "Opinions about Blacks" Index in 1994. Data from the 1986-92 NES's look essentially the same.

In a broad brush, the data support claims that white opposition to affirmative action is, to some degree, rooted in negative views of blacks.¹² The more negative whites feel about blacks, the less likely they are to endorse racial preference programs in the marketplace. The gap between the affirmative action opinions of whites at both ends of the continuum is very large indeed.

Nonetheless, there are reasons for interpreting Figure 1 cautiously. First, all the items in the "Opinions about Blacks" Index are closely related to racial preference issues; one specifically mentions "special favors." Second, even allowing for overlapping questions, substantial portions of whites oppose racial preferences in the job market, regardless of their opinions about blacks. Roughly 60% of whites who are very favorable toward blacks nonetheless oppose racial preferences in the marketplace. Three-quarters of whites who have at least somewhat positive opinions about blacks are opposed to affirmative action in hiring and promotion.

Our data dovetail with Sniderman and Piazza's contention that, although general feelings toward blacks and opinions about affirmative action are related, the association is weak.¹³ Moreover, it is difficult to determine if whites' feelings about blacks affect their views of affirmative action, or if the arrow of causality should be reversed.¹⁴ We concur that "to suppose that the positions that whites take on affirmative action are driven by prejudice mistakes entirely the fundamental basis of their reactions."¹⁵

Figure 1
Whites' Opinions on Affirmative Action in Hiring by "Attitude About Blacks" Index

FIGURE 1	Favor Affirmative Action Strongly	Favor Not Strongly	Oppose Not Strongly	Oppose Strongly	DK
Very Pro-Black	21%	21%	42%	17%	*
Slightly Pro-Black	5	14	31	43	8%
Neutral	4	5	25	61	5
Slightly Anti-Black	2	3	19	76	1
Very Anti-Black	1	1	5	92	1

Figure 2
Whites' Opinions on Affirmative Action in Hiring by Egalitarian Index

FIGURE 2	Favor Affirmative Action Strongly	Favor Not Strongly	Oppose Not Strongly	Oppose Strongly	DK
Very Egalitarian	13%	16%	24%	45%	3%
Slightly Egalitarian	3	8	25	60	4
Neutral	5	6	24	61	4
Slightly Individual	1	3	19	73	3
Very Individual	1	1	8	89	2

Source: 1994 National Election Studies, University of Michigan.

Figure 3
Whites' Opinions About Affirmative Action in Hiring by Party ID

FIGURE 3	Favor Affirmative Action Strongly	Favor Not Strongly	Oppose Not Strongly	Oppose Strongly	DK
Democrat	5%	9%	25%	58%	4%
Republican	2	3	20	74	2
Independent	4	6	16	66	9

Source: 1994 National Election Studies, University of Michigan.

Individualism vs. Egalitarianism

Next, we turn to the link between whites' opinions about affirmative action and their support for individualism or egalitarianism. Using NES data, figure 2 depicts the relationships between whites' views of affirmative action in the job market and scores on an "Individualism-Egalitarianism" Index for 1994.¹⁶

In several regards, the data in Figure 2 mirror those in Figure 1. Although knowing something about whites' support for individualism or egalitarianism provides useful purchase on how they feel about affirmative action, large portions of those most committed to egalitarianism still oppose racial preferences in the marketplace. Still, the tendency for strong disapproval of racial preferences to increase at each category on the "Individualism-Egalitarianism" Index is impressive. Roughly 90% of whites most committed to individualism are strongly opposed to affirmative action in the job market. Figure 2 supports those who contend that a core value such as individualism has an impact on opposition to racial preference policies.

Is Affirmative Action a "Wedge" Issue?

Conventional wisdom suggests that, were affirmative action to become a major issue in 1996, Democrats would

be the losers while Republicans would reap substantial benefits.

Figure 3 depicts whites' opinions about affirmative action by their party identification. These data buttress the proposition that voter opposition to affirmative action may redound to the Democrats' detriment.¹⁷ They show that although the partisan affiliations of whites have a slight impact on the strength of opinions, overwhelming majorities of whites oppose racial preferences in the job market, irrespective of partisanship. Were a campaign to be fought out between a Democratic candidate perceived as strongly favoring preferential treatment of blacks in hiring and promotion, and a Republican contestant equally strong in opposition, the latter might "wedge" a sizable harvest of votes from white Democrats.

Additional support for this comes from the October 1995 Ohio Poll. To estimate the likely impact of various issues on voting, we asked registered voters if they would be more or less likely to vote for a political candidate who espoused a particular policy position.¹⁸ One question was: "What about a candidate with a plan to maintain preference programs for minorities in hiring and promotion?"

The Ohio Poll data show that a candidate's stance in favor of retaining

preference programs for minorities would not affect the votes of 40% of registered voters. (In this regard, the racial preferences issue is typical; "no difference" was the modal response for nine of the 11 questions.) On balance, however, more registered voters said they would be inclined to vote against a pro-racial preferences candidate than said they would be more likely to vote for her/him. Thirty-seven percent said they would be more likely to vote against a candidate with a plan to keep racial preferences in the marketplace, while 22% said they would be more inclined to vote for her/him.

Once again, however, race makes a substantial difference. Sixty-one percent of blacks who were registered to vote said they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who favored racial

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preference policies, while 12% said they would be less inclined. Eighteen percent of whites said they would be more likely to vote for a candidate planning to maintain racial preferences in the job market, while 40% said they would be less likely to vote for her/him. No significant difference was found between men and women.

The Swing Vote

Presidential races are said to be won or lost among the "swing" voters. These are people with roughly equal probabilities of voting either Democratic or Republican. If we assume that most "core" Democratic and Republican voters¹⁹ will not be much affected by opinions about affirmative action, how would a candidate who favored racial preferences fare among swing voters? According to the October Ohio survey, he/she would lose votes, enough perhaps in an otherwise close contest to lose the election. Although 44% of swing voters say a candidate's stance on behalf of affirmative action would not affect their vote, significantly more of the remaining swing voters say they would vote *against* that candidate than would vote for her/him (35% vs. 21%). The percentage of swing voters saying that a candidate's support of affirmative action would be "very" or "extremely" likely to make them vote *against* her/him is double the percentage saying they would be "very" or "extremely" likely to vote *for* her/him (22% vs. 11%).

If affirmative action in the job market is a factor in the upcoming campaign, candidates who favor racial preferences may fare poorly at the polls. For that reason, Democratic politicians might be well-advised to avoid a campaign fought on racial preferences.

Endnotes

- 1 See, e.g., Marianne Means, "The White Male Strategy," *Dayton Daily News*, February 17, 1995, p. 15a.
- 2 "Affirmative Action on the Edge," *U.S. News & World Report*, February 13, 1995, pp. 32-38.
- 3 See, e.g., John Boudreau, "Son of Proposition 187," *Washington Post* (National Weekly Edition), January 2-8, 1995, p. 33.
- 4 Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective*, New York: Basic Books, 1963. See also Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider, "The Bakke Case: How Would It Be Decided at the Bar of Public Opinion?" *Public Opinion*, Vol. 1 (March/April 1978), pp. 38-44.
- 5 Everett C. Ladd, "Affirmative Action, Welfare, and the Individual," *The Public Perspective*, Vol. 6#4 (June/July 1995), p. 23.
- 6 See, e.g., Ladd, *op.cit.*; Jim Norman, "America's Verdict on Affirmative Action is Decidedly Mixed," *The Public Perspective*, Vol. 6#4 (June/July 1995), pp. 49-52; Jack Citrin, "Affirmative Action in the People's Court," *The Public Interest*, 122 (Winter 1996), 39-48.
- 7 Citrin, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
- 8 The National Election Studies are conducted by the University of Michigan's Center for Political Studies. We are responsible for all analyses and interpretations.
- 9 The Ohio Poll is conducted by the University of Cincinnati's Institute for Policy Research. Respondents are Ohio residents 18

years old and older. May/June 1995 survey, n = 834. October 1995 survey, n = 856. March 1996 survey, n = 841. Psephologists note that Ohio is quite representative of the nation as a whole (see, e.g., Richard J. Scammon and Ben Wattenberg, *The Real Majority*, revised ed., New York: Donald I. Fine, 1992). Therefore, a poll of Buckeye State residents provides useful insights about public opinion nationwide.

10 Citrin, *op. cit.*; Stephen Earl Bennett, Eric W. Rademacher, Andrew E. Smith, and Alfred J. Tuchfarber, "Americans' Opinions about Affirmative Action," unpublished Ms., University of Cincinnati, 1995.

11 The four are: (1) "Irish, Italians, Jewish and other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors." (2) "Over the past few years blacks have gotten less than they deserve." (3) "It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites." (4) "Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class." Respondents were asked to "agree strongly," "agree somewhat," "neither agree nor disagree," "disagree somewhat," or "disagree strongly" with each. Questions 1 and 3 were recoded for consistency. Lower scores signify more positive feelings about blacks.

12 Paul M. Sniderman and Thomas Piazza, *The Scar of Race*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993, pp. 98-99.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 102-104.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Six items make up the "Individualism-Egalitarianism" Index: (1) "Our society should do whatever is necessary to make sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed." (2) "We have gone too far in pushing equal rights in this country." (3) "This country would be better off if we worried less about how equal people are." (4) "It is not really that big a problem if some people have more of a chance in life than others." (5) "If people were treated more equally in this country we would have many fewer problems." (6) "One of the big problems in this country is that we don't give everyone an equal chance." Respondents were asked to "agree strongly," "agree somewhat," "neither agree nor disagree," "disagree somewhat," or "disagree strongly." Items 2, 3, and 4 were recoded to be consistent with the rest. Lower scores signified more egalitarian dispositions.

17 See Citrin, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-44.

18 The series began as follows: "I'm going to read some descriptions of positions political candidates might take. Please tell me whether you would be more or less likely to vote for a candidate with this position, or that it would make little difference. Respondents were then probed: Is it *extremely* likely, *very* likely, *somewhat* likely that you would vote *for/against* such a candidate, or would it make little difference?" N = 598 registered voters.

19 See Alfred J. Tuchfarber and Andrew E. Smith, "A Note on the Construction of a Measure of Voting Intention," unpublished Ms., University of Cincinnati, 1995.

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