

Why race-based affirmative action is still needed in college admissions

The Supreme Court has agreed to take up a case that will allow it to rule again on whether universities may consider race in admissions decisions — and given the makeup of the conservative-dominated panel, affirmative action supporters are concerned.

The case in point involves admissions at Harvard University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which use race as a factor in admissions in ways that lower courts have found compliant with previous Supreme Court rulings. But earlier decisions upholding affirmative action were made before the court's membership tilted firmly to the right during the Trump administration.

For years, race-based affirmative action has been losing support in the United States — but this post explains why it is still important. It's not just to reverse historical discrimination — something that it seems many conservatives would rather have us forget — but also because of the benefits of diversity to individual students and American society.

America historically prided itself on being a melting pot of cultures. Some people may pretend college admissions are based on a meritocracy, but, of course, they aren't, and race-based affirmative action has been a critical mechanism to help create diverse communities at schools.

I asked Natasha Warikoo, professor of sociology at Tufts University, about this issue, and below you can read her analysis about why race-based affirmative action is still important.

By Natasha Warikoo:

1. **Simply put, American society continues to suffer from racial inequality, so affirmative action provides more equitable opportunities for a top-notch college education.**

Racial inequality in the United States stems partly from the ongoing knock-on effects of past exclusion and discrimination. For example, [White families have](#) had more opportunities over generations to accumulate wealth; that wealth often aids middle-class Whites as they go to buy their first home. The average White family [today holds](#) more than \$170,000 in net assets, compared with just \$17,000 for the average Black family. In turn, middle-class Black families [tend to live](#) in more disadvantaged neighborhoods than middle-class White families. [This affects](#) where their children go to school, and who they go to school with.

But history is not the only driver of racial inequality. Decades of research have shown that unequal opportunities continue to shape the educational experiences of Black, Latino and Native American youths, even within the same schools, and even with well-meaning teachers. To take one example, [when tested](#) for unconscious bias, most teachers show pro-White, anti-Black bias. In turn, [when teachers hold](#) implicit racial bias, their Black students have demonstrably worse learning outcomes. Black youths [also experience](#) more disciplinary surveillance at school and harsher punishments for the same behaviors compared with their White peers.

In contrast, White youths tend to enjoy many privileges in the United States. These privileges include growing up, on average, [in more affluent neighborhoods](#) and [attending higher-performing schools than Black and Latino youths, even of the same social class](#); and having parents with more financial [resources to support their development](#). Increasingly, Asian Americans, too, [benefit from privileges](#) previously associated with Whites.

Affirmative action helps to account for these historical and contemporary inequities, and makes a difference in the lives of its beneficiaries. Attending an elite college improves future earnings for Black and Latino students. In contrast, [the research is unclear](#) on whether attending an elite college makes a difference for future earnings for White, non-low-income, non-first generation students. Scholars think this difference is because students from families with fewer resources are more likely to draw on the connections they make in college for future opportunities, compared with those whose parents can already provide those connections, no matter where they go to college.

2. Affirmative action benefits all students by exposing them to diverse perspectives on campus. Residential segregation in the United States means that many kids will grow up with little interaction with kids of other races. This is particularly true for White kids. After Supreme Court Justice Lewis F. Powell Jr. voiced acceptance for the “diversity rationale” in the 1978 *Bakke* decision, social scientists set out to understand just how diverse learning environments shape educational experiences, if at all. We now know the considerable benefits to all students of having a quorum of classmates of all races. It makes students [more likely to socialize with peers of other races](#), which in turn seems to improve their [intellectual engagement and performance](#). It even bolsters their [leadership skills](#). Experiencing a diverse student body in college is associated with having [diverse friendships](#), [greater civic engagement](#) and [positive racial attitudes](#) many years after graduation.

3. Affirmative action leads to more-diverse leadership, which is essential for sound decision-making and legitimacy.

Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, in the 2003 *Grutter v. Bollinger* case, argued that a lack of diversity in leadership of society would delegitimize that leadership in the minds of many citizens. That is, national unity and effective governance required that people of all racial groups should see themselves in the leadership of the country, which signals that people like them are included in social opportunities. A comparison with Britain, where no affirmative action exists, is informative here. When Barack Obama was elected president in 2008, many in Britain asked why Britain did not have a cadre of potential leaders who are Black like the United States did. Indeed, many U.S. underrepresented minority leaders have pointed to affirmative action as having enabled their social position, including [Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor](#) and [Obama](#). In contrast, despite about 14 percent of Britain’s population identifying as Black or Asian/South Asian, the country has never had a [prime minister of color](#), nor a [Supreme Court justice of color](#).

Affirmative action is also an effective policy to address the goal of increasing diversity among professionals, such as doctors, lawyers and teachers.

If selective colleges are to adhere to the mission of contributing to the public good that so many of them espouse, they must provide opportunities to talented and eager teens from a range of backgrounds. Affirmative action is one small mechanism to increase the likelihood that Black, Latino and Native American youths have a realistic shot at the privileges that education at the likes of Harvard, the University of North Carolina and other selective colleges can provide. Without it, White and Asian American students, too, will miss out on the opportunity to better understand a wide range of life experiences and perspectives.

Valérie Strauss for **The Washington Post**, January 30, 2022
