TEN MYTHS ABOUT AFFIRMATIVE ACTION
SCOTT PLOUS

In recent years, affirmative action has been debated more intensely than at any other time in its 35-year history. Many supporters view affirmative action as a milestone, many opponents see it as a millstone, and many others regard it as both or neither—as a necessary, but imperfect, remedy for an intractable social disease. My own view is that the case against affirmative action is weak, resting, as it does so heavily, on myth and misunderstanding. Here are some of the most popular myths about affirmative action, along with a brief commentary on each one.

Myth 1: The only way to create a color-blind society is to adopt color-blind policies. Although this statement sounds intuitively plausible, the reality is that color-blind policies often put racial minorities at a disadvantage. For instance, all else being equal, color-blind seniority systems tend to protect White workers against job layoffs, because senior employees are usually White (Ezorsky, 1991). Likewise, color-blind college admissions favor White students because of their earlier educational advantages. Unless preexisting inequities are corrected or otherwise taken into account, color-blind policies do not correct racial injustice—they reinforce it.

Myth 2: Affirmative action has not succeeded in increasing female and minority representation. Several studies have documented important gains in racial and gender equality as a direct result of affirmative action (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Murrell & Jones, 1996). For example, according to a report from the U.S. Labor Department, affirmative action has helped 5 million minority members and 6 million White and minority women move up in the workforce (“Reverse Discrimination,” 1995). Likewise, a study sponsored by the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs showed that between 1974 and 1980 federal contractors (who were required to adopt affirmative action goals) added Black and female officials and managers at twice the rate of noncontractors (Citizens’ Commission, 1984). There have also been a number of well-publicized cases in which large companies (e.g., AT&T, IBM, Sears Roebuck) increased minority employment as a result of adopting affirmative action policies.

Myth 3: Affirmative action may have been necessary 30 years ago, but the playing field is fairly level today. Despite the progress that has been made, the playing field is far from level. Women continue to earn 76 cents for every male dollar (Bowler, 1999). Black people continue to have twice the unemployment rate of White people, twice the rate of infant mortality, and just over half the proportion of people who attend four years or more of college (see Figure 1). In fact, without affirmative action the percentage of Black students at many selective schools would drop to only 2% of the student body (Bowen & Bok, 1998). This would effectively choke off Black access to top universities and severely restrict progress toward racial equality.

Myth 4: The public doesn’t support affirmative action anymore. Public opinion suggests that the majority of Americans support affirmative action, especially when the polls avoid an all-or-none choice between affirmation as it currently exists and no affirmative action whatsoever (see Figure 2). For example, a Time/CNN poll found that 80% of the public felt “affirmative action programs for minorities and women should be continued at level” (Roper Center for Public Opinion, 1995a). What the public opposes strongly are quotas, set-asides, and “reverse discrimination.” For instance, when the poll asked people whether they favored programs “requiring businesses to hire a specific number or quota of minorities and women,” 63% oppose a plan (Roper Center for Public Opinion, 1995b). As these results indicate, most members of the public oppose racial preferences that violate not only procedural justice—they do not oppose affirmative action.

Myth 5: A large percentage of White workers will lose out if affirmative action is continued. Government statistics do not support this myth. According to the U.S. Commerce Department, there are 1.3 million unemployed civilians and 112 million employed White civilians (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Thus, even if every unemployed White worker in the United States were to displace a White worker, only 1% of Whites would be affected. Furthermore, affirmative action pertains only to job-qualified applicants: the actual percentage of affected Whites would be a fraction of 1%. This is not the stuff of job loss among White workers, and those who do lose factory relocation...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Source*</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>Responses in %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| o you favor or oppose affirmative action programs for inorities and women for job hiring in the workplace? | Gallup² | 8/01 | 1,523 | Favor: 58  
Oppose: 36  
Don't know/Refused: 5 |
| o you favor or oppose affirmative action programs for inorities and women for admission to colleges and diversities? | Gallup³ | 8/01 | 1,523 | Favor: 56  
Oppose: 39  
Don't know/Refused: 6 |
| general, do you think we need to increase, keep the same, or decrease affirmative action programs in this country? | Gallup⁴ | 7/01 | 2,004 | Increase: 27  
Keep the same: 34  
Decrease: 30  
Don't know/Refused: 9 |
| o you generally favor or oppose affirmative action programs for women and minorities? | CNN/USA Today⁵ | 1/00 | 1,027 | Favor: 58  
Oppose: 33  
Not sure: 9 |
| That's the best thing to do with affirmative action programs giving preference to some minorities—leave the programs as they are, change the programs, or do away with them entirely? | CBS/New York Times⁶ | 12/97 | 1,258 | Leave as are: 24  
Keep but change: 43  
Do away with: 25  
Not sure: 8 |
| That about affirmative action programs that set quotas ... o you favor affirmative action programs with quotas, or do you favor affirmative action programs only without quotas, or do you oppose all affirmative action programs? | Associated Press⁷ | 7/95 | 1,006 | Favor with quotas: 16  
Favor without quotas: 47  
Oppose all: 28  
Don't know: 9 |

of affirmative action. Thus, affirmative action has traditionally enjoyed the 
support of Republicans as well as Democrats.

Myth 10: Support for affirmative action means support for preferential selection 
procedures that favor unqualified candidates over qualified candidates. Actually, most 
supporters of affirmative action oppose this type of preferential selection. Preferential 
selection procedures can be ordered along the following continuum:

1. Selection among equally qualified candidates. The mildest form of affirmative 
action selection occurs when a female or minority candidate is chosen from a pool of equally 
qualified applicants (e.g., students with identical college entrance scores). Survey research 
suggests that three-quarters of the public does not see this type of affirmative action 
as discriminatory (Roper Center for Public Opinion, 1995e).

2. Selection among comparable candidates. A somewhat stronger form occurs 
when female or minority candidates are roughly comparable to other candidates 
(e.g., their college entrance scores are lower, but not by a significant amount). The logic 
here is similar to the logic of selecting among equally qualified candidates; all that is 
needed is an understanding that, for example, predictions based on an SAT score of 620 
are virtually indistinguishable from predictions based on an SAT score of 630.

3. Selection among unequal candidates. A still stronger form of affirmative 
action occurs when qualified female or minority candidates are chosen over candidates 
whose records are better by a substantial amount.

4. Selection among qualified and unqualified candidates. The strongest form 
of preferential selection occurs when unqualified female or minority members are chosen 
over other candidates who are qualified. Although affirmative action is sometimes mistakenly equated with 
this form of preferential treatment, federal regulations explicitly prohibit 
affirmative action programs in which unqualified or unneeded 
employees are hired (Bureau of National Affairs, 1979).

Even though these selection procedures blend into one another (due in part to 
the difficulty of comparing incommensurable records), a few general 
observations can be made. First, of the four different procedures, the selection 
of women and minority members among equal or roughly comparable candidates 
has the greatest public support, adheres most closely to popular conceptions of 
fairness, and reduces the chances that affirmative action beneficiaries will be 
perceived as unqualified or undeserving (Kravitz & Platania, 1993; Nacoste, 1985; 
Turner & Pratkanis, 1994). Second, the selection of women and minority members 
among unequal candidates—used routinely in college admissions—has deeply divided the nation (with the strongest opposition coming from White 
male and conservative voters.) And finally, the selection of unqualified candidates 
is not permitted under federal affirmative action guidelines and should not 
be equated with legal forms of affirmative action. By distinguishing among these 
four different selection procedures, it becomes clear that opposition to stronger 
selection procedures need not imply opposition to milder ones.

Some writers have criticized affirmative action as a superficial 
that does not address deeper societal problems by redistributing 
developing true educational equality. Yet affirmative action was 
posed as a cure-all solution to inequality. Rather, it was intended or 
dress discrimination in hiring and academic admissions. In asces 
value of affirmative action, the central question is merely this: In the 
of sweeping societal reforms—unlikely to take place any time soon— 
affirmative action help counteract the continuing injustice caused by c 
nation? The research record suggests, unequivocally, that it does.

REFERENCES


pp. 13–21.

Washington, DC: Author.


University Press.


Helmert, M. E., Simon, M. C., & Repper, D. P. (1987). Intentionally favored, 
tionally harmed? Impact of sex-based preferential selection on self-percept 


fects of target and of respondent sex and ethnicity. Journal of Personality 
Psychology, 78, 928–938.


Reverse discrimination of whites is rare, labor study reports. (1995, March 18). 

Roper Center for Public Opinion. (1995a). Question ID: USYANKP95007, Q1 
tronic database. Available from Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe W 
http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe

Roper Center for Public Opinion. (1995b). Question ID: USYANKP95007, Q1 
tronic database. Available from Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe W 
http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe

database]. Available from Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe We 
http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe

Electronic database. Available from Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe W 
http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe

Electronic database. Available from Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe W 
http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe