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Americans for Meritocracy

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Issue
Brief

Introduction

Last summer, in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard (SFFA)*, the United States Supreme Court issued a blockbuster decision eliminating affirmative action in higher education. In ending the nation’s controversial 45-year experiment with race-conscious admissions, the *SFFA* majority emphasized how affirmative action had evolved to discriminate against certain “overrepresented” minorities (Asian students), who did not receive a boost on account of their race, in favor of other “underrepresented” minorities (black and Hispanic students) who did:

College admissions are zero-sum.... [A] benefit applied to some applicants but not to others necessarily advantages the former group at the expense of the latter ... [such that] the guarantee of equal protection cannot mean one thing when applied to one individual and something else when applied to a person of another color.¹

The Court’s ruling in *SFFA* may be applied to the consideration of race in other areas, including in admissions at the nation’s service academies and selective public high schools and in employment and federal contracting, all of which are being actively litigated in lower courts.² Amid this new legal and political upheaval over the future of affirmative action, many progressives have sought to delegitimize *SFFA* on two grounds.

First, some have described the case as conservative judicial activism. The narrative goes something like this: three new justices joined the court and abandoned precedent so that they could impose their *extreme and narrow conservative policy preferences* on the public. Arthur Coleman, a cofounder and managing partner of EducationCounsel, put it this way: “You might say, ‘Gee, it was only

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seven years ago that the University of Texas prevailed on these very same [affirmative action] issues. What's the difference?' In large part, it's the composition of the Court."³ Not to be outdone, President Biden indicted the decision as extreme, saying immediately after the ruling was handed down that "this is not a normal court."⁴

Second, many affirmative action advocates, especially in the media, insist that most Americans (including most Asians) favor affirmative action. Therefore, they say that *SFFA* was "out of step" with the public's support for diversity in higher education.⁵ For example, in the very same news conference where he blasted *SFFA*, President Biden said: "Take a look at how [the court has] ruled on a number of issues that have been precedent for 50, 60 years. That's what I meant by not normal. ...Across the board, the vast majority of the American people don't agree with the majority of decisions the court is making."⁶

This report marshals new evidence to show that both criticisms miss the mark.

Drawing on two survey experiments from the 2022 Cooperative Election Study (CES),⁷ we show that affirmative action was politically vulnerable before *SFFA*. Specifically, we argue that the *SFFA* ruling strongly aligns with growing consensus that merit should trump diversity in university admissions, particularly when race-conscious admissions policies harm Asian students.

Specifically, our survey data show that:

- On average (across several versions of an affirmative action question), seven in 10 Americans said that they opposed race-based admissions in higher education.
- It was important that *SFFA* focused on discrimination against Asian students. Respondents who were told that affirmative action harmed Asian (rather than white) students were more likely to oppose racial preferences in university admissions.
- The discrimination against Asian students that was revealed in the *SFFA* litigation made Democrats, in particular, more skeptical of affirmative action: fewer than half of Democrats supported affirmative action once they learned that Asian students would be disadvantaged. In contrast, 68% of Democrats who were told that affirmative action would disadvantage white students said that they supported maintaining racial preferences.
- In an experiment where survey respondents played the role of a medical school admissions officer, the vast majority made admissions decisions based on race-neutral, merit-based criteria. Specifically, when asked to choose between two competing applicants (one Asian, one black), most chose the applicant with better academic qualifications, even if it came at the expense of maximizing diversity in the medical school. While respondents do value racial diversity at the margins, we find that they do so only when applicants have relatively comparable academic qualifications. However, in practice, universities' rarely implemented race-based admissions policies this way.⁸

In sum, despite what progressive critics have argued in their attempt to delegitimize the decision, *SFFA* was not an example of the Court simply placating a small slice of the electorate (conservative whites). Rather, we show that *SFFA*'s concern for discrimination against Asian students reflects a wide degree of consensus from across the political spectrum. That consensus is driven by a public, including most Democrats, that prioritizes merit-based, rather than diversity-maximizing, admissions criteria.⁹

How Affirmative Action Is Framed Matters

Issue framing matters in politics. Research has long shown that the way an issue is framed can lead to significant policy change.¹⁰ As one of us has written previously, “every issue can be understood, or defined, in multiple ways. Issue definition draws attention to some dimensions of an issue rather than others, [helping determine] which values, goals, and ideas are understood to be germane to a policy choice ... when contemplating an issue.”¹¹

In recent years, the debate surrounding affirmative action in American higher education has changed considerably. In the past, legal and political challenges to the practice focused on the harms to white students (see, e.g., *Bakke*, 1978; *Hopwood*, 1996; *Grutter and Gratz*, 2003; *Fisher*, 2013 and 2016). More recently, the issue has been framed to focus on discrimination against Asian applicants (e.g., *SFFA*, 2023).

Did this reframing of the affirmative action debate weaken public support for racial preferences? More specifically, does public support for affirmative action tend to decline when Asians (rather than whites) are shown to be disadvantaged by race-based admissions policies? To find out, we conducted a framing experiment on the most recent CES, a large national survey of Americans carried out in November 2022 (before the *SFFA* ruling).¹² In our first experiment, survey respondents were assigned to one of four possible versions of the following question (the bold font indicates the conditions that were randomly varied):

Some people say that **{because of past discrimination / because it is important to have diversity on college campuses}**, Blacks should be given preference in university admissions. Others say that such preference is wrong because it discriminates against **{whites/Asians}**. What about your opinion—are you for or against preferential admissions policies for Blacks?

About half the respondents were told that critics of affirmative action worry that these policies discriminate against Asian students, while the other half were told that such policies would hurt white students. We found no evidence that the first part of the question (which provided different rationales for affirmative action) had any impact on the results; so to keep things as straightforward as possible, we focus on the results of the latter experiment here. Although all the results (broken out by racial subgroup) are shown in the Appendix, we highlight only the headline findings here in the body of the report.

Three main findings stand out.

First, on average (across the different experimental conditions), most respondents (71%) indicated that they oppose racial preferences (just 29% support them).¹³ Unfortunately, we do not have large enough samples of racial-minority respondents to make reliable comparisons *between* minority subgroups. Therefore, we pool, or combine, responses from non-Hispanic whites (N=501), Asians (N=19), and Latinos (N=83), in order to compare them with responses from non-Hispanic blacks (N=79), since research shows that blacks hold decidedly more positive views of affirmative action than do other racial/ethnic subgroups.



We find little difference in support for affirmative action between whites alone and the pooled group of whites, Asians, and Latinos. When considered alone, 77% of non-Hispanic whites oppose the use of racial preferences in college admissions, compared with 75% of the white, Asian, and Latino grouping (across all the experimental conditions). We have fewer than 100 black respondents in our sample, but they were far more likely to favor preferences (70% in favor versus just 30% against).

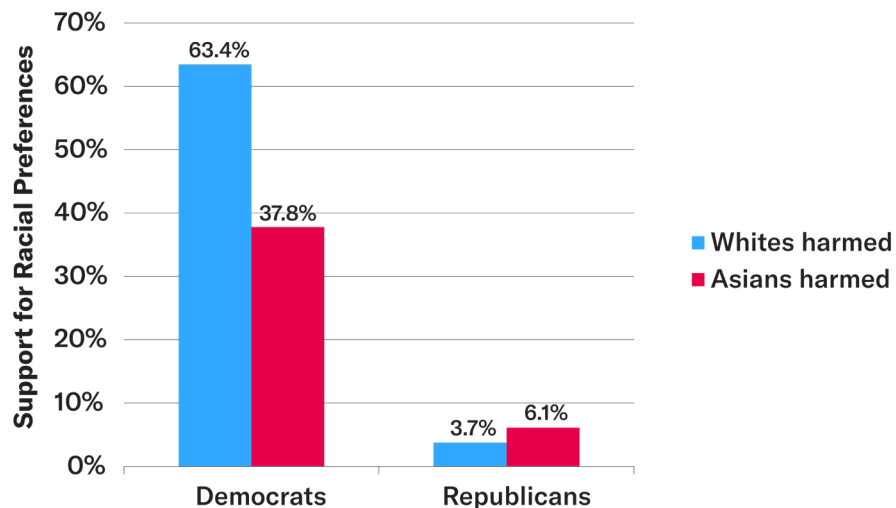
Our second major finding comes from our other framing experiment, which found that respondents who learn that affirmative action policies may harm (rather than white) students are far more likely to oppose racial preferences. *That is, we find compelling (and statistically significant) evidence that when Asian disadvantage is emphasized, support for affirmative action craters.* In total, support for preferences dropped by 10 percentage points, from 35.4% to 25.6%. Among whites alone, support dropped by 8 points, and among the pooled white, Asian, and Latino grouping, support dipped 10 points (all statistically significant differences).¹⁴

Third, in order to test the extent to which *SFFA* was, as critics allege, a “right-wing” ruling that catered to conservative whites, we break out the results by party identification in order to examine how the framing experiment worked on different political coalitions. We were especially interested in whether key elements of the Obama electoral coalition (progressive whites, Asians, and Hispanics) felt cross-pressured by affirmative action policies that hurt Asians (an important and growing member of that coalition).

Unsurprisingly, we found strong opposition to affirmative action among Republicans (95%), irrespective of whether Asians or whites were mentioned as the victims. But among Democrats, we witnessed a remarkable crack in the Obama coalition. Specifically, seven out of 10 Democrats who were told that affirmative action disadvantaged whites favored giving racial preferences to black students. But when Democratic respondents were informed about the disadvantages to Asian students, a minority (46%) said that they supported such preferences. Among the nonblack elements of the diverse Obama coalition (progressive whites, Asians, Hispanics), support dried up even more. As **Figure 1** shows, 63% of these voters favored preferences that came solely at the expense of white students, but only 38% backed affirmative action when they learned that Asian applicants would lose out.

Figure 1

Nonblack Democrats Oppose Affirmative Action That Harms Asian, but Not White, Students



Note: Sample consists of white, Asian, and Hispanic Democrats and all Republicans.

Source: Authors' analysis of an original survey experiment fielded on the 2022 Cooperative Election Survey (CES)



Suffice it to say that ending affirmative action wasn't a right-wing affair. Rather, the Court's evolving affirmative action jurisprudence tracked a shift among nonblack Democratic voters who, once cross-pressured by Asian plaintiffs' interests, ultimately abandoned support for race-based university admissions (a position in line with most of the nonblack Obama electoral coalition). In sum, our findings show that when affirmative action programs threaten opportunities for Asians (as opposed to whites), most Americans—especially most Democrats—become far less comfortable with using race in admissions decisions.

Americans Want Universities to Use Merit-Based Admissions Criteria, Considering Diversity Only as a Tiebreaker Among Relatively Equal Applicants

When interpreting public opinion surveys, it is important to focus on specific questions that pollsters ask. Question wording is especially important for polling about affirmative action.¹⁵ For example, proponents of the practice often point to polls that show strong support for programs that “help [minorities] get better access” to higher education.¹⁶ Opponents, however, can just as easily find polls that show that most Americans oppose using race as a factor in admissions or hiring decisions.¹⁷

These findings reveal something important about Americans' values. Large majorities broadly favor equality of opportunity but not equality of outcomes. Since equality of opportunity seems congruent with universities taking affirmative steps to diversify (another popular value), it's not surprising that the public responds favorably to abstract questions about “affirmative action.” By contrast, most Americans oppose *preferences*, because that emphasizes how race-conscious policies intentionally benefit some groups (and harm others) to obtain equal outcomes.

Values, however, are only one part of the affirmative action polling puzzle. Most people do not pay close attention to politics, and thus do not know very much about how complex policy issues—including affirmative action programs—work *in practice*.¹⁸ To be clear, we are not saying that Americans don't hold sincere beliefs about what constitutes fairness in admissions policies. But one's answer to a question about affirmative action depends not only on those beliefs about fairness but also on beliefs about how affirmative action programs actually work. Poll questions themselves, however, can have a strong impact on how respondents understand an issue. As political scientist Terry Moe explains:

Because [Americans] come to any survey with little information, they will be quite sensitive to information contained within the survey itself. ...This information determines how the issue is “framed.” And the framing, in turn, influences which (of many possible) values and beliefs get activated in people's minds, and thus how people respond. ...If public opinion is to be well measured on an issue, the issue must be framed with great care. The framing should provide respondents with enough information to give them a good sense of what the issue is about. The information also needs to be balanced, so that respondents are not pushed to see the issue in a positive or a negative light.¹⁹



We agree with Moe so far as it goes, but we think that measuring public support for affirmative action presents additional challenges, ones that limit the value of conventional survey questions. Affirmative action puts so many competing values—diversity, inclusion, merit, opportunity, and nondiscrimination—directly in tension with one another, that even the most unbiased pollsters will struggle to write balanced questions that clearly convey these trade-offs for an unsophisticated public.

As an alternative, we propose experimental vignettes as a helpful solution.

Our vignettes are modeled after a technique used by political scientists to study voters’ preferences in elections known as “candidate choice survey experiments.”²⁰ In our vignettes, respondents are asked not to evaluate two competing political candidates but to play the role of an admissions officer and decide between two competing medical school applicants.

Specifically, in our experiment, we told each survey respondent that “a medical school must choose between two candidates who are competing for the final spot in next year’s class of future doctors.” Then we ask the respondents to “carefully review each applicant’s profile before selecting the applicant they would admit.” Importantly, although the applicants’ accomplishments were randomly varied, the specific pair of applicants that each respondent saw always consisted of an Asian applicant and a black applicant (Table 1).²¹

Table 1

Illustration of Applicant Pairings in Medical School Admissions Vignette Experiment

Pair 1 Example

Applicant A	Applicant B
<p><u>Accomplishments:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.8 grade point average (GPA) • Scored better than 90% of applicants on Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) • Interns for [cancer/ biomedical] research lab • Volunteers at local [animal shelter / food bank] <p><u>Personal:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asian American • Male • Middle-class background 	<p><u>Accomplishments:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.5 grade point average (GPA) • Scored better than 65% of applicants on Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) • Interns for [cancer/ biomedical] research lab • Volunteers at local [animal shelter / food bank] <p><u>Personal:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black/ African American • Male • Middle-class background

Pair 2 Example

Applicant A	Applicant B
<p><u>Accomplishments:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.8 grade point average (GPA) • Scored better than 90% of applicants on Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) • Interns for [cancer/ biomedical] research lab • Volunteers at local [animal shelter / food bank] <p><u>Personal:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asian American • Male • Middle-class background 	<p><u>Accomplishments:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.7 grade point average (GPA) • Scored better than 85% of applicants on Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) • Interns for [cancer/ biomedical] research lab • Volunteers at local [animal shelter / food bank] <p><u>Personal:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black/ African American • Male • Middle-class background



The experiment was designed to test whether, and when, Americans believe that diversity should trump merit in medical-school admissions. In other words, we wanted to know whether respondents would ever reject the more “qualified” applicant so that they could admit one who would increase racial diversity at the medical school.

First, we tested the effects of making the two competing applicants closer or further apart on the conventional merit-based criteria that medical schools consider: college grades (GPA) and performance on the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT). We created two applicant pairings. In the first pairing arrangement, which we call the *real-world merit gap*, the Asian applicant boasts a 3.8 undergraduate GPA and a 90th-percentile MCAT score, while the black applicant has a much lower 3.5 GPA and 65th-percentile MCAT score. We call this the real-world merit gap because these numbers approximate the actual differences (on average) between black and Asian applicants who were accepted to an accredited U.S. medical school at the time of our survey (**Table 2**).²²

Table 2

Average MCAT Scores and GPAs for Matriculants to U.S. MD-Granting Medical Schools, by Race/Ethnicity, 2023–24

Matriculants	Asian American	White	Hispanic	Black
MCAT	514.3	512.4	506.4	505.7
Approximate MCAT Percentile Rank	88–90	83–86	66–69	62–66
GPA	3.83	3.80	3.66	3.59

Source: Association of American Medical Colleges
A perfect score on the MCAT is 528. Here, GPA is based on a 4.0 scale.

In the second applicant pairing, which we call the *affirmative action edge case*, the Asian applicant boasts the same high grades and test scores as before, but we increase the black applicant’s GPA to 3.7 and MCAT score to the 85th percentile to create an “edge case”—i.e., one in which the underrepresented minority (the black applicant) is only slightly academically less impressive than the overrepresented minority (the Asian applicant).

We also randomized background information on the hypothetical medical school in the question prompt. One group of respondents were told that the medical school’s student body already matched “the racial/ethnic composition of the United States.” The other group were shown enrollment figures that matched the real-world racial composition of America’s medical schools (i.e., where Asians are overrepresented, and blacks and Hispanics underrepresented).²³ Respondents were randomly assigned to these different contextual cues, so we can be sure that any difference in their willingness to admit the underrepresented minority applicant is directly attributable to what they learned from the question about the lack of diversity or the magnitude of merit-based differences between the applicants.

The intuition of the experiment is straightforward. We first vary whether the medical school lacks representation (racial diversity); then we vary how close the underrepresented minority applicant is on merit-based criteria to the higher-performing overrepresented minority applicant. This allows us to examine *whether* and *when* Americans are willing to support affirmative action in practice—as opposed to supporting it in the abstract (as a non-zero-sum program that ensures equal opportunities for underrepresented minorities).



What do we find?

First, regardless of the vignette received, most respondents make their admissions decisions on merit-based criteria (college grades and MCAT scores). Consider the “strongest” case for giving the nod to the black applicant: one in which blacks are severely underrepresented at the medical school and the black applicant in question is an “edge case,” i.e., only a little below the Asian applicant on academic qualifications. Even in this most favorable (and, as we have noted, unrealistic) scenario, only about one in three respondents would admit the less qualified black applicant. About 70% *still* choose the Asian applicant.

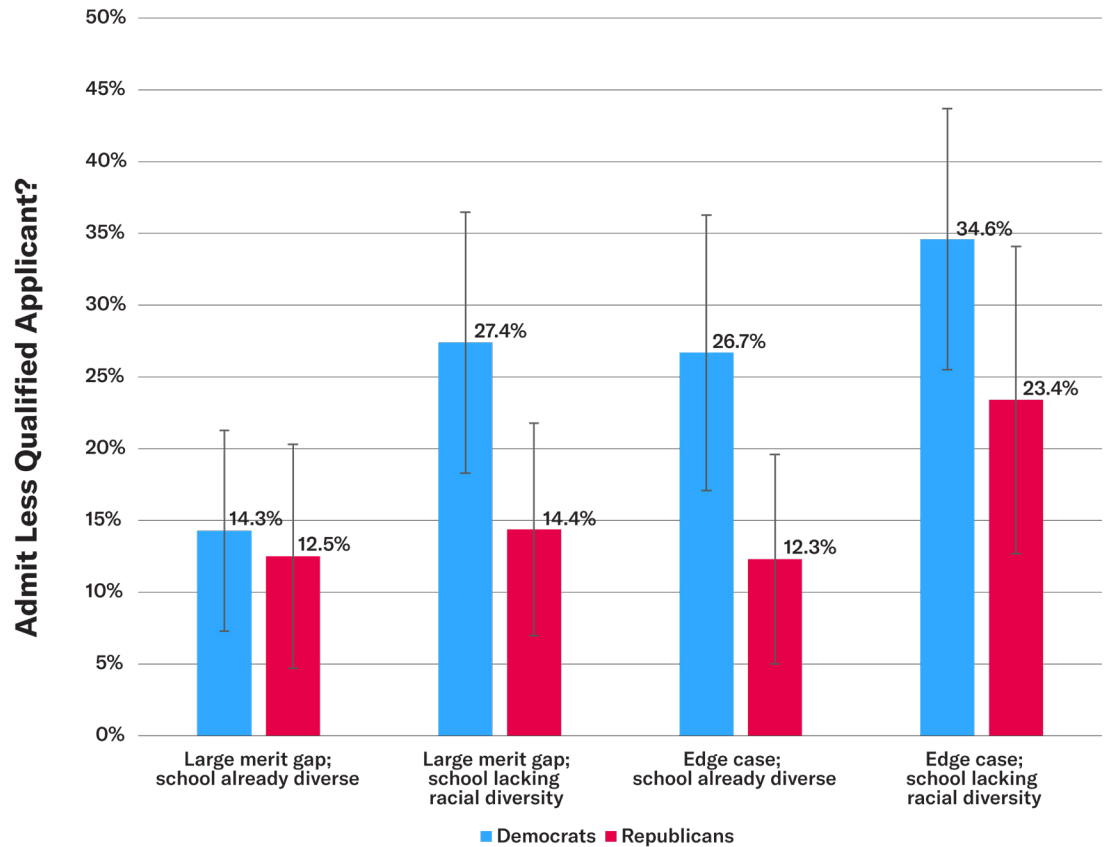
Figure 2 shows the rates at which nonblack Democrats and nonblack Republicans would admit the black applicant over the Asian applicant, depending on the experimental condition. As we expected, political affiliation makes some difference, but respondents in both parties make their admissions decisions overwhelmingly using merit-based criteria. Even when the black and Asian applicants are close on these criteria and the school lacks diversity, only 35% of nonblack Democrats say that they would admit the black applicant to diversify the medical school.

Diversity, however, is still important for these respondents—and especially for Democrats. When Democratic respondents are told that the black applicant has much lower grades and test scores than the Asian applicant, and that the medical school is already racially representative of the country, just 14% admit the black candidate. However, regardless of the black applicant’s qualifications (relative to the Asian), about one in three Democrats will admit the black student when told that blacks are underrepresented, and Asians overrepresented, at the medical school. In other words, diversity looms larger for Democrats, and they feel cross-pressured, despite their clear concern for merit, to consider racial representation in medical school admissions.



Figure 2

**Results of Applicant Choice Survey Experiment,
by Political Party (Nonblack Democrats)**



Source: Authors' analysis of an original survey experiment from the 2022 CES

The results of our vignette experiment are telling. Remember, when Americans are asked abstract questions about affirmative action, they tend to respond favorably, saying that they support programs that ensure equal opportunities for minorities in education. However, this experiment reveals what happens when we dispense with abstraction. Instead of asking citizens to understand what “affirmative action” means, our vignette experiment asks them to perform a straightforward task that mirrors what admissions officers actually have to do: evaluate actual applicants relative to a pool and choose. In the case of medical school admissions, Americans are a merit-first bunch. They tend to choose the applicant with better academic qualifications. They do appear to value diversity at the margins, but they allow it to become a deciding factor only when applicants are close on the merits, rather than far apart.



Americans Favor Merit-Based Admissions Criteria and Reject Anti-Testing Narratives

Some readers might object that our vignette experiment emphasizes standardized test scores as the linchpin of merit-based admissions criteria. After all, many affirmative action proponents claim that such tests are racially biased and are poor proxies of students' academic qualifications. To address this criticism, we asked all our survey respondents two additional sets of questions that probe their beliefs about testing and the various criteria that should be used in higher-education admissions.

First, we asked respondents which of the following two statements about the role of standardized tests—such high school exit exams, the SAT/ACT, and Advanced Placement (AP) exams—was closer to their own views:

Since their inception almost a century ago, standardized tests have been instruments of racism that perpetuate racial bias in our society.

Although they are imperfect instruments, standardized tests are one objective indicator of a student's academic progress and ability.²⁴

Over 75% chose the second option. What's more, most *nonwhite* respondents firmly rejected the first option (that standardized tests are instruments of racism that perpetuate bias). Over 65% of nonwhites said that, in fact, such tests are an imperfect objective indicator of academic ability. Just over 55% of non-Hispanic black respondents agreed. In other words, only a minority of blacks (44%) said that standardized tests were instruments of bias rather than objective indicators of learning.

We then asked a series of questions (modeled after a similar survey conducted by Pew Research) about the factors that *should* and *should not* be used in college and (separately) medical school admissions. Specifically, for undergraduate college admissions, we asked whether the following criteria should be a major factor, minor factor, or not a factor:

Race or ethnicity

Character or personality factors (e.g., likeability, courage, kindness)

Scores on standardized tests, such as the SAT or ACT

High school grades

For medical school admissions, we asked about:

Race or ethnicity

Character or personality factors (e.g., likeability, courage, kindness)

Scores on the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT)

College grades



The full set of results for all demographic subgroups are displayed in Table A3 in the Appendix. Here we wish only to note that Americans of all racial backgrounds are far more supportive of using high school grades and SAT/ACT (in the context of college admissions) and undergraduate GPAs and MCAT scores (in the context of medical school admissions) than any other factor we examined. In other words, most respondents would likely object not only to Harvard’s use of race/ethnicity but also to its use of the now-infamous “personality scores” (which were biased against Asian students) to ensure that it recruited a racially diverse class. Americans of all stripes rejected both consideration of race and of subjective factors, and instead supported using test scores and grades as the major factor in admissions decisions.

Conclusion

Since the Supreme Court eliminated affirmative action in higher education, university administrators have been hard at work devising various ways to weaken the impact of the decision. One popular workaround has been to encourage students to write about their race or ethnicity in application essays. Consider one of the 2023–24 supplemental essay prompts for admission to Harvard College: “Harvard has long recognized the importance of enrolling a diverse student body. How will the life experiences that shape who you are today enable you to contribute to Harvard?”²⁵

This prompt is not only in tension with the Court’s opinion in *Students for Fair Admissions*—the majority noted that “universities may not simply establish through application essays or other means the regime we hold unlawful today”—but it also goes against public consensus that race should play, at most, a minimal factor in admissions. Our findings from the 2022 CES show that for large swaths of the American public—including, we would note, most nonwhite Democrats—merit trumps race when it comes to university admissions; and this is especially true when Asians are framed as the victims of affirmative action.



Appendix

Table A1

Asian Framing Experiment (Subgroup Results)

Note: “Asian frame” refers to the experimental condition in which respondents were told that affirmative action would harm Asian (rather than white) applicants.

Sample: All Americans

Asian frame?	Give blacks college admissions preferences?		
	No	Yes	Total
No	228	125	353
	64.59	35.41	100.00
Yes	265	91	356
	74.44	25.56	100.00
N	493	216	709
	69.53	30.47	100.00

Sample: Non-Hispanic Whites

Asian frame?	Give blacks college admissions preferences?		
	No	Yes	Total
No	185	69	254
	72.83	27.17	100.00
Yes	199	48	247
	80.57	19.43	100.00
N	384	117	501
	76.65	23.35	100.00

**Sample: Non-Hispanic Whites and Asians**

Asian frame?	Give blacks college admissions preferences?		
	No	Yes	Total
No	191	71	262
	72.90	27.10	100.00
Yes	209	49	258
	81.01	18.99	100.00
N	400	120	520
	76.92	23.08	100.00

Sample: Non-Hispanic Blacks

Asian frame?	Give blacks college admissions preferences?		
	No	Yes	Total
No	10	28	38
	26.32	73.68	100.00
Yes	14	27	41
	34.15	65.85	100.00
N	24	55	79
	30.38	69.62	100.00

Sample: Latinos/Hispanics

Asian frame?	Give blacks college admissions preferences?		
	No	Yes	Total
No	20	20	40
	50.00	50.00	100.00
Yes	31	12	43
	72.09	27.91	100.00
N	51	32	83
	69.53	30.47	100.00

**Sample: All Democrats**

Asian frame?	Give blacks college admissions preferences?		
	No	Yes	Total
No	50	105	155
	32.26	67.74	100.00
Yes	84	71	155
	54.19	45.81	100.00
N	134	176	310
	43.23	56.77	100.00

Sample: Non-Hispanic White, Asian, and Latino Democrats

Asian frame?	Give blacks college admissions preferences?		
	No	Yes	Total
No	45	78	123
	36.59	63.41	100.00
Yes	74	45	119
	62.18	37.82	100.00
N	119	123	242
	49.17	50.83	100.00

Sample: All Republicans

Asian frame?	Give blacks college admissions preferences?		
	No	Yes	Total
No	133	7	140
	95.00	5.00	100.00
Yes	133	8	141
	94.33	5.67	100.00
N	266	15	281
	94.66	5.34	100.00



Sample: Non-Hispanic White, Asian, and Latino Republicans

Asian frame?	Give blacks college admissions preferences?		
	No	Yes	Total
No	129	5	134
	96.27	3.73	100.00
Yes	124	8	132
	93.94	6.06	100.00
N	253	13	266
	95.11	4.89	100.00



Table A2

Medical School Admissions Experiment (Subgroup Results)

MeritGap: Asian applicant has a 3.8 undergraduate GPA and a 90th-percentile MCAT score; black applicant has 3.5 GPA and 65th-percentile MCAT score.

EdgeCase: Asian applicant has a 3.8 undergraduate GPA and 90th-percentile MCAT score; black applicant has 3.7 GPA and 85th-percentile MCAT score.

Rep: Medical school has a student body that corresponds to the racial/ethnic makeup of the United States.

UR: Medical school has a student body that matches real-world racial composition of America’s medical schools (Asians overrepresented and blacks/Hispanics underrepresented).

Sample: All Americans

Treatment	Admit black medical applicant?		
	No	Yes	Total
MeritGap+Rep	211	45	256
	82.42	17.58	100.00
MeritGap+UR	192	71	263
	73.00	27.00	100.00
Edge Case+Rep	170	63	233
	72.96	27.04	100.00
Edge Case+UR	171	77	248
	68.95	31.05	100.00
N	744	256	1000
	74.40	25.60	100.00



Sample: Non-Hispanic Whites

Treatment	Admit black medical applicant?		
	No	Yes	Total
MeritGap+Rep	152	19	171
	88.89	11.11	100.00
MeritGap+UR	135	37	172
	78.49	21.51	100.00
Edge Case+Rep	134	33	167
	80.24	19.76	100.00
Edge Case+UR	119	49	168
	70.83	29.17	100.00
N	540	138	678
	79.65	20.35	100.00

Sample: Non-Hispanic Whites and Asians

Treatment	Admit black medical applicant?		
	No	Yes	Total
MeritGap+Rep	159	19	178
	89.33	10.67	100.00
MeritGap+UR	141	37	178
	79.21	20.79	100.00
Edge Case+Rep	138	34	172
	80.23	19.77	100.00
Edge Case+UR	125	50	175
	71.43	28.57	100.00
N	563	140	703
	80.09	19.91	100.00



Sample: Non-Hispanic Blacks

Treatment	Admit black medical applicant?		
	No	Yes	Total
MeritGap+Rep	19	15	34
	55.88	44.12	100.00
MeritGap+UR	15	22	37
	40.54	59.46	100.00
Edge Case+Rep	12	18	30
	40.00	60.00	100.00
Edge Case+UR	12	15	27
	44.44	55.56	100.00
N	58	70	128
	80.09	19.91	100.00

Sample: Latinos/Hispanics

Treatment	Admit black medical applicant?		
	No	Yes	Total
MeritGap+Rep	20	10	30
	66.67	33.33	100.00
MeritGap+UR	29	11	40
	72.50	27.50	100.00
Edge Case+Rep	15	10	25
	60.00	40.00	100.00
Edge Case+UR	24	9	33
	72.73	27.27	100.00
N	88	40	128
	68.75	31.25	100.00

**Sample: All Democrats**

Treatment	Admit black medical applicant?		
	No	Yes	Total
MeritGap+Rep	105	24	129
	81.40	18.60	100.00
MeritGap+UR	82	43	125
	65.60	34.40	100.00
Edge Case+Rep	74	36	110
	67.27	32.73	100.00
Edge Case+UR	80	52	132
	60.61	39.39	100.00
N	341	155	496
	80.09	19.91	100.00

Sample: Non-Hispanic White, Asian, and Latino Democrats

Treatment	Admit black medical applicant?		
	No	Yes	Total
MeritGap+Rep	84	14	98
	85.71	14.29	100.00
MeritGap+UR	69	26	95
	72.63	27.37	100.00
Edge Case+Rep	63	23	86
	73.26	26.74	100.00
Edge Case+UR	70	37	107
	65.42	34.58	100.00
N	286	100	386
	74.09	25.91	100.00



Sample: All Republicans

Treatment	Admit black medical applicant?		
	No	Yes	Total
MeritGap+Rep	66	11	77
	85.71	14.29	100.00
MeritGap+UR	80	16	96
	83.33	16.67	100.00
Edge Case+Rep	75	10	85
	60.00	40.00	100.00
Edge Case+UR	53	16	69
	76.81	23.19	100.00
N	274	53	327
	83.79	16.21	100.00

Sample: Non-Hispanic White, Asian, and Latino Democrats

Treatment	Admit black medical applicant?		
	No	Yes	Total
BigGap+Rep	84	14	98
	85.71	14.29	100.00
BigGap+UR	69	26	95
	72.63	27.37	100.00
Edge Case+Rep	63	23	86
	73.26	26.74	100.00
Edge Case+UR	70	37	107
	65.42	34.58	100.00
N	286	100	386
	74.09	25.91	100.00



Sample: Non-Hispanic White, Asian, and Latino Republicans

Treatment	Admit black medical applicant?		
	No	Yes	Total
BigGap+Rep	63	9	72
	87.50	12.50	100.00
BigGap+UR	77	13	90
	85.56	14.44	100.00
Edge Case+Rep	71	10	81
	87.65	12.35	100.00
Edge Case+UR	49	15	64
	76.56	23.44	100.00
N	260	47	307
	84.69	15.31	100.00

**Table A3****Public Support for Different College and Medical School Admissions Criteria**

Note: Authors' analysis of CES questions modeled on Pew survey questions about the role that various criteria should play in university admissions

Respondent group	Admissions domain	Don't consider tests	Tests a minor factor	Tests a major factor	Don't consider grades	Grades a minor factor	Grades a major factor
All Americans	College	7	38	55	6	22	73
Non-Hispanic whites	College	7	43	50	4	21	74
Non-Hispanic whites + Asians	College	7	43	50	4	21	75
Blacks	College	11	41	48	7	24	69
Latinos	College	12	31	57	6	31	63
Whites, Asians, Latinos	College	8	41	51	5	22	73
Democrats	College	9	47	43	4	25	70
Republicans	College	6	28	66	3	18	79
All Americans	Medical	5	19	76	4	14	82
Non-Hispanic whites	Medical	4	18	78	3	13	84
Non-Hispanic whites + Asians	Medical	4	19	78	3	13	84
Blacks	Medical	8	24	68	5	23	71
Latinos	Medical	8	19	73	7	22	71
Whites, Asians, Latinos	Medical	4	19	77	4	14	82
Democrats	Medical	4	25	71	4	18	79
Republicans	Medical	3	10	86	2	11	86



Respondent group	Admissions domain	Don't consider race	Race a minor factor	Race a major factor	Don't consider personality traits	Personality a minor factor	Personality a major factor
All Americans	College	58	29	13	24	44	31
Non-Hispanic whites	College	60	32	9	27	46	26
Non-Hispanic whites + Asians	College	60	31	9	26	47	27
Blacks	College	32	32	36	20	41	40
Latinos	College	49	32	19	19	40	41
Whites, Asians, Latinos	College	58	31	10	35	46	29
Democrats	College	37	43	20	22	45	33
Republicans	College	79	15	6	26	49	25
All Americans	Medical	64	25	11	20	45	35
Non-Hispanic whites	Medical	66	27	7	20	49	31
Non-Hispanic whites + Asians	Medical	66	27	7	20	49	31
Blacks	Medical	43	30	27	16	44	41
Latinos	Medical	56	26	18	20	41	38
Whites, Asians, Latinos	Medical	64	27	9	20	48	32
Democrats	Medical	45	38	17	16	45	39
Republicans	Medical	84	12	4	24	47	29

Endnotes

- ¹ *Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 143 S. Ct. 2141, 600 U.S. 181 (2023).
- ² In July 2023, Judge Clifton L. Corker of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Tennessee enjoined the Small Business Administration (SBA) from using racial preferences in a business development program known as “8(a).” See *Ultima Services Corporation v. U.S. Dept. of Agriculture et al.*, 2:20-CV-00041-DCLC-CRW (E.D. Tenn. 2023). For more on racial preferences in public-sector employment and federal contracting, see Judge Glock, “Welcome to the World of Minority Contracting,” *City Journal* (Spring 2023).
- ³ See American Council on Education, “Transcript: Contingency Planning and Prep for a Post–Supreme Court Decision Landscape,” Apr. 19, 2023.
- ⁴ Adam Liptak, “Supreme Court Rejects Affirmative Action Programs at Harvard and U.N.C.,” *New York Times*, June 29, 2023.
- ⁵ See, e.g., Kimmy Yam, “70% of Asian Americans Support Affirmative Action. Here’s Why Misconceptions Persist,” NBC News, Nov. 14, 2020; idem, “Behind the Vocal Asian American Minority Railing Against Affirmative Action,” NBC News, Nov. 1, 2022; Char Adams, “Majority of Americans Favor Affirmative Action in Colleges as Supreme Court Seems Poised to End It, Poll Says,” NBC News, May 31, 2023.
- ⁶ Alex Gangitano, “Biden on Affirmative Action Decision: ‘This Is Not a Normal Court,’” *The Hill*, June 29, 2023.
- ⁷ CES is a multi-investigator project where individual scholars run separate survey modules as part of a larger survey carried out by YouGov. Our sample (N=1000) is weighted to be representative of the American public on core demographics. All results reported here are from this single CES survey, which was carried out in November 2022.
- ⁸ For example, Peter Arcidiacono, a professor of economics at Duke University who was an expert witness in *Students for Fair Admissions*, found that a black applicant in the fourth-lowest academic decile has a greater chance of admission to Harvard (12.8%) than an Asian American applicant in the top academic decile (12.7%).
- ⁹ Although it was not the focus of our study here, we should note that our CES survey found (consistent with other surveys) that most Americans oppose universities giving preferences to applicants whose parents are alumni (legacy-based admissions).
- ¹⁰ See, e.g., Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Frank R. Baumgartner, Suzanna L. De Boef, and Amber E. Boydston, *The Decline of the Death Penalty and the Discovery of Innocence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Christina Wolbrecht and Michael T. Hartney, “‘Ideas About Interests’: Explaining the Changing Partisan Politics of Education,” *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 3 (2014): 603–30.
- ¹¹ Wolbrecht and Hartney, “‘Ideas About Interests,’” 604.



- ¹² Our experiment drew on a similar study by sociologists Jennifer Lee and Van C. Tran that looked at support for affirmative action in the workplace. Specifically, Lee and Tran asked respondents whether blacks should receive preferences in hiring and promotion at work. By varying whether Asians were framed as either victims (alongside whites) or beneficiaries of affirmative action programs (alongside blacks), they found modest differences in “support [for affirmative action] shifting in different ways among different [racial] groups.” See Jennifer Lee and Van C. Tran, “The Mere Mention of Asians in Affirmative Action,” *Sociological Science* 6 (September 2019): 551–79. In contrast to Lee and Tran, we study affirmative action in university admissions because Asian disadvantage is more unambiguous (and salient) in higher education. Another important difference is that our experiment frames the victims of affirmative action as *either* white or Asian, separately. This approach more accurately reflects how debates over affirmative action in higher education have played out in American law and politics. See, e.g., Caroline S. Engelmayer and Kristine E. Guillaume, “Court Filings Reveal Academic Strength of Asian-American Applicants to Harvard,” *Harvard Crimson*, June 19, 2018; Peter Arcidiacono, Josh Kinsler, and Tyler Ransom, “Asian American Discrimination in Harvard Admissions,” *European Economic Review* 144 (May 2022): article 104079; Peter Arcidiacono, Michael Lovenheim, and Maria Zhu, “Affirmative Action in Undergraduate Education,” *Annual Review of Economics* 7, no. 1 (August 2015): 487–518.
- ¹³ We reluctantly gave respondents the option to say that they held “no opinion” about racial preferences in university admissions. While this approach went against our better judgment because it gave respondents a way to obscure their views on a controversial issue, we kept it so that we could compare our results with Lee and Tran (who offered this option). Note that all the results that we report here focus exclusively on those respondents who answered that they either supported or opposed giving preferences; respondents who gave no opinion on the topic are not included in our analysis. Across the entire sample, 51% opposed preferences, just 20% supported them, and 29% chose “no opinion.”
- ¹⁴ While support also dropped by 8 points among black respondents, these results were not statistically significant (unsurprisingly, given the small sample size).
- ¹⁵ For an overview, see Renu Mukherjee, “Stacking the Deck in Favor of Affirmative Action? How ‘Framing’ Affects Polling on One of America’s Most Controversial Policies,” Manhattan Institute, Feb. 16, 2023.
- ¹⁶ APIAVote, AAPI Data, and Asian Americans Advancing Justice, 2022 Asian American Voter Survey, July 2022.
- ¹⁷ See, e.g., Ruth Igielnik, “A Majority of Americans Say Race Should Not Be a Factor in College Admissions,” *New York Times*, June 29, 2023; John Gramlich, “Americans and Affirmative Action: How the Public Sees the Consideration of Race in College Admissions, Hiring,” Pew Research Center, June 16, 2023.
- ¹⁸ See, e.g., Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).
- ¹⁹ Terry M. Moe, “Cooking the Questions: Phi Delta Kappa’s Annual Poll Is Regarded as the Definitive Measure of Where Americans Stand on Education Issues. But Are Its Surveys Biased and Its Reporting Self-Interested? (Check the Facts),” *Education Next* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 71–78.
- ²⁰ See, e.g., Jens Hainmueller, Dominik Hangartner, and Teppei Yamamoto, “Validating Vignette and Conjoint Survey Experiments Against Real-World Behavior,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, no. 8 (February 2015): 2395–400; Susanne Schwarz and Alexander



Coppock, “What Have We Learned About Gender from Candidate Choice Experiments? A Meta-Analysis of Sixty-Seven Factorial Survey Experiments,” *Journal of Politics* 84, no. 2 (April 2022): 655–68.

- 21 We chose to conduct a single experiment so that each of our survey respondents saw only one pair of applicants. Although we would have liked to have run the same experiment using different applicant configurations (e.g., white, Hispanic), other permutations (e.g., a higher-performing underrepresented minority candidate and a lower-performing overrepresented applicant), and different contexts (e.g., undergraduate admissions, employment), we worried that repeating the exercise would tip participants off about the purpose of the experiment and bias the results. Ultimately, we chose to focus on medical school admissions because we had real-world data on the characteristics and attributes of matriculating applicants by racial group.
- 22 Table 2 reports the average MCAT scores and GPAs for matriculants to U.S. MD-granting medical schools for 2023–24, the most recent data available from the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC). Our experiments rely on AAMC data from the 2021–22 academic year; however, the data are nearly identical.
- 23 For example, respondents were either told that “the current student body at this particular medical school roughly matches the racial/ethnic composition of the United States: 58% white, 19% Hispanic, 13% Black or African American, and 6% Asian,” or they were told that “the current student body at this particular medical school is 50% white, 30% Asian, 8% Hispanic, 8% Black or African American, and 4% Native American.” These latter numbers were taken from the most recent report (at the time of our study) on racial diversity medical schools from AAMC.
- 24 Note, this survey question uses the exact language of a report on standardized testing published by the nation’s largest teachers’ union, the National Education Association. See: <https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/racist-beginnings-standardized-testing>
- 25 See Harvard College, Office of Admissions and Financial Aid, First Year Application Supplement, Valid for Entrance in Fall 2024