

The Facts and Fictions about Affirmative Action

“Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.”

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

Affirmative action first became federal policy in 1965 when President Johnson issued Executive Order 11246, telling federal agencies they couldn't contract with firms unless they were committed to equal opportunity for African-Americans. In 1970, President Nixon added equal opportunity for women.

The result? Affirmative action programs have helped five million people of color and six million women advance in the workforce.

Yet despite these gains, affirmative action has been under attack for the last twenty years.

In 1996, Governor Wilson of California led an initiative campaign to abolish that state's affirmative action program, and in Washington state an initiative will be on the November 1998 ballot to kill it there. At the same time, the right wing continues to attack affirmative action at the federal level.

Following is a discussion sheet, please share it with your friends and coworkers:



Why you should support affirmative action

Consider these numbers:

- Women still earn only about \$.70 for every \$1.00 earned by men.
- African Americans still have twice the unemployment rate of whites, half the median family income, and half the proportion who attended four or more years of college.
- The average income for Hispanic women with college degrees is less than the average for white men with high school diplomas. White men (43% of the workforce) are 95% of senior managers and 85% of tenured professors.
- Women hold less than five percent of senior level management positions in private firms.

Common misconceptions about affirmative action answered

Isn't affirmative action just a quota system?

No, in fact using a quota system is illegal.

Doesn't this just preferentially benefit African Americans and people of color?

Actually, the biggest beneficiaries have been white women. Other groups eligible for affirmative action protections under some governmental jurisdictions are: other minorities, seniors, people with disabilities, Vietnam war veterans, and specially disabled veterans.

In addition, Blacks have a history in this country that is unlike that of any other group. For 245 years, Blacks were enslaved, and for another 100 they suffered legalized discrimination—until only 30 years ago.

Don't unqualified people get promoted just because they are from a minority?

No. Under federal guidelines, preferential selection of unqualified people is not allowed.

Instead, affirmative action levels the playing field for everyone by encouraging the selection of employees on open, job-related criteria, instead of the informal networks that recreate old patterns of privilege.

Don't we simply need equal policies for everyone?

Not when mechanisms currently in place favor those who have already had advantages. College admissions tests favor those who have been through better schools. Typically, seniority systems protect whites preferentially from layoffs as more white workers have more seniority — because back then, only whites were hired. And many employers simply do not treat all races equally.

Studies show that, despite equivalent credentials, African Americans are three times more likely to be rejected for jobs than their white counterparts.

But the American public no longer supports affirmative action.

This misconception is based on polls that offer people an all-or-nothing choice between affirmative action as it is now or no affirmative action. What the public most clearly rejects are quotas, set-asides, and “reverse discrimination,” but so do most advocates of affirmative action. But when people are given intermediate options, polls by *NBC News/Wall Street Journal* show most people would prefer reforming some aspects of affirmative action programs, but keeping some form of it in place.