

# TRB

FROM WASHINGTON

## Admit It

**T**HE CLASH OVER affirmative action is a clash between two deeply valid principles. The first is a procedural ideal: color-blindness. (Because race is a morally irrelevant trait, people should be treated without regard to it.) The second is a moral outcome: racial equality. (Since our history is marred by racial injustice, we should try to reduce racial inequalities in wealth and power.) In this week's editorial ("Admitting Error"), THE NEW REPUBLIC's editors are eloquent on the first point and blind to the second.

The alternatives to affirmative action being considered by states like Texas, California, and Florida are all about reconciling nonracial procedures with racially just outcomes. In Texas, for instance, the state would guarantee a place at any public university to students in the top ten percent of every high school class, regardless of race. The editors are correct that this would lower admissions standards. But their predictions of educational havoc are hyperbolic. After all, in the years prior to enactment of the ten percent plan, more than 90 percent of Texas students in the top tenth of their high school classes who applied to the University of Texas at Austin were already being admitted.

More fundamentally, in their passion for racially neutral procedures, the editors blithely ignore racially unjust outcomes. Officials at elite public universities are not simply playing crude budget politics as they struggle to maintain black and Hispanic enrollments. They are trying, as best they can, to exercise responsible stewardship of multibillion-dollar state-funded educational philanthropies. Such institutions do not need diversity for their political viability alone. Promoting it also furthers a just social order. When the courts or voters demand that student admissions be color-blind, they are not insisting that universities abandon the effort to achieve racial diversity. Indeed, this is exactly the point of the new programs, programs that voters applaud and judges accept but which TNR's editors scorn.

To oppose any decline in educational standards for the sake of racial diversity, as the editors in effect do, is to take an extreme position. It is to imply that race is not only illegitimate in admissions but—more fundamentally and disturbingly—irrelevant to the broader mission of America's public universities.

To grasp the point, consider the following terminological distinction: If a selection criterion for college admissions can be applied regardless of the racial identity of applicants, call it "color-blind." On the other hand, if a selection criterion is chosen with no concern as to its impact on various racial groups, call it "color-neutral." The importance of this distinction becomes clear when one considers that both ameliorating the social disadvantage of minorities and exacerbating this disadvantage can be achieved with color-blind policies. Yet, intuitively, a color-blind policy explicitly intended to harm blacks could never be morally tolerable, while color-blind policies adopted to reduce racial inequality are commonplace and uncontroversial. For instance, while many object to the racial gerrymandering of electoral districts, most find acceptable the move from at-large to district-based elections, even when that shift is clearly made to get more blacks into office.

The ten percent plan in Texas and similar proposals in Florida and California are color-blind, in my terminology, but they are not color-neutral—and it's a good thing, too. These policies mainly benefit students with low test scores and good grades at less competitive high schools—students who are disproportionately black and Hispanic. (And the legislative history in Texas shows clearly that this was the lawmakers' intent.) So, although the direct use of race in admissions decisions has been legally proscribed, Texas now uses a proxy for race calculated to achieve a similar result. Yet the reverse would be impossible. Had a color-blind admissions formula been proposed with the express intent of excluding black and Hispanic students, it would have been morally (and constitutionally) unacceptable.

Why does the public denounce race-conscious admissions while enthusiastically endorsing race-blind efforts to achieve the same goals? Because Americans intuitively understand that reversing the effects of our history of white supremacy is good, while perpetuating those effects is evil. Hence, a college admissions formula cannot be judged solely by the instruments used to implement it. Most people of all races understand that we must also look at its consequences—primary among which is its impact on black and Hispanic enrollments. This is as it should be. In Texas, as elsewhere in the

country, the key moral question is not race-blindness but race-neutrality.

This struggle among competing ideals is what the preference argument in college admissions is all about. When exclusive colleges and universities alter their admissions procedures to enroll more blacks and Hispanics (whether through affirmative action or ten percent plans), they tacitly and publicly confirm that racial equality is a fundamental concern, one worth paying a price for. And putting substantive racial equality high on our list of national goals has consequences beyond the ivory tower. It leads naturally, for example, to the idea that the end of formal discrimination against blacks in this post-civil-rights era should not foreclose a vigorous public discussion about racial justice. Critics of affirmative action, like the editors of this magazine, disagree. They argue that because an individual's race has no moral relevance, it is either wrong or unnecessary to formulate public purposes in racial terms.

This argument is mistaken. Maintaining the legitimacy of public institutions by ensuring they serve all communities in the polity is prudent. And it is also just. To be sure, conveying to college students the ultimate moral irrelevance of race in our society is a deeply important pedagogical goal. Yet, ironically, attaining this goal may require functional attention by administrative personnel to the racial composition of the learning environment. Teaching that "not all blacks think alike" is much easier when there are enough blacks around to show their diversity of thought. Of course, students of all races should know this is true as a matter of principle. But in the real world it cannot be resolved simply by appealing to principle. People must experience diversity as a practical condition of their lives.

So my objection to the editors—and my defense of affirmative action and ten percent plans—rests on both practical and theoretical grounds. Many Americans are appalled at the prospect that the number of black students at elite college campuses might drop to two or three percent of the student body. They think this would be bad for the social and political health of our nation, and they think it would be morally wrong. I agree with them. But not everyone does. With an intense political campaign being mounted against affirmative action, much persuasion on this point will be needed. I suggest that we start by drawing a bright, clear distinction between the procedural morality of color-blindness and the historical morality of racial justice—a distinction whose importance TNR's editors unwittingly illustrate.

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