

Affirmative action's time is up

With the country rapidly diversifying, white racial anxiety is rising. President Obama should end the program to avoid a destructive white backlash.

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The biggest blow to affirmative action in its nearly 50 years of existence was the election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States. Not because Obama is against the policy (he is, as on so many issues, nuanced in his support, i.e. he believes it should exist but not extend to his children) but because his election was widely perceived as being reflective of a profound shift in the country's racial balance.

I believe that white racial anxiety, not immigration, will be the most significant and potentially dangerous socio-demographic trend of the coming decade. The combination of changing demographics and symbolic political victories on the part of nonwhites will inspire in whites a greater racial consciousness, a growing sense of beleaguement and louder calls to end affirmative action or to be included in it.

I am so convinced of this that I think to avoid a destructive white backlash in the face of a rapidly diversifying society, the president should call for an end to affirmative action. In a "Nixon goes to China" sort of way, Obama — by virtue of his racial background, party affiliation and political temperament — is better poised to pull off such a difficult task more gracefully than any other politician.

Ideally, policy, like politics, is the art of the possible. No matter how good its intentions or outcomes, the benefits of any policy should clearly outweigh the social costs. When affirmative action was established, it was intended to benefit a small percentage of the U.S. population, but as the rationale and scope of the program evolved, so did the number of people it included. Large-scale post-1965 immigration also complicated the equation and ultimately upset the political calculus that made affirmative action politically viable.

Not surprisingly, California became the first state to abolish state-sanctioned affirmative action in education and contracts, through a ballot initiative in 1996. That's not because white voters here, who overwhelmingly supported the measure, have more negative feelings toward minorities. Nor is it because they are more committed to fairness and absolute colorblindness than Anglos elsewhere. It happened here, quite simply, because minorities were fast approaching 50% of the population and whites felt that the playing field had tilted against them.

Is there hard evidence that whites are hurt by affirmative action? No. Over the course of four decades of the program, white educational attainment has increased. And whites still make up the vast majority of federal employees. Have blacks or Latinos reached parity with whites in employment and income? Not even close. In fact, during this recession, they lag behind whites for higher-paying jobs at the largest rates in a decade.

But such data are not likely to change the growing perception among whites that the deck has been stacked against them. The number of court cases in which whites claim reverse discrimination is going up, and we're routinely hearing the cries of white minority victimhood. And it's not just coming from white nationalists.

Conservative New York Times columnist Ross Douthat has argued that the culture of affirmative action in the Ivy Leagues is not only depriving poor whites of a shot at entering the nation's elite schools but fueling "racially tinged conspiracy theories" such as those claiming that the president is a foreign-born commie. Conservative Democratic Sen. Jim Webb of Virginia essentially argued in a Wall Street Journal op-ed that plenty of white folk have it rough too and that affirmative action only makes things rougher.

Calls to scrap affirmative action will only grow more fervent as the rest of the nation begins to look more like California. As whites in more states become the minority, they will seek to protect what they perceive to be their self-interest, or will be seduced by the siren song of minority victimology that has captivated other groups. Or both.

As I see it, we can either end such programs sooner with less pain or suffer the consequences of a much more brutally divisive battle later. It's hard enough to get along in a diverse society. We don't need the remedy for institutionalized racism to create more racial tensions. We need to find new, less divisive ways to fight inequality.

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