



# LATINO POLICY & ISSUES BRIEF

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## WHY WHITE AMERICANS OPPOSE AFFIRMATIVE ACTION A GROUP-INTEREST APPROACH

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Affirmative action is a collection of legislative and administrative policies intended to promote the inclusion of racial and ethnic minorities, women, and the disabled into the workplace and institutions of higher education (Crosby 2004). Despite widespread support for the egalitarian ideals that inspired affirmative action, these policies evoke considerable opposition from white Americans (Schuman et al. 1997; Sears et al. 1997). This is especially the case for race-based affirmative action policies (Murrell et al. 1994).

Social science research has yielded two conflicting explanations for why whites oppose race-based affirmative action: principled opposition and racism. The principled opposition perspective suggests that whites oppose affirmative action because it violates the meritocratic belief that all individuals should be treated equally (Bobocel et al. 1998; Sniderman and Piazza 1993). The racism perspective suggests that prejudice against minorities drives white opposition to affirmative action (Dovidio and Gaertner 1996; Kluegel and Smith 1983).

We argue that previous research has paid insufficient attention to the role of group interest in generating

opposition to affirmative action among whites. In other words, previous research has failed to adequately explore how the perceived effect of affirmative action on members of the white in-group affects whites' opposition to affirmative action. Our research suggests that, independent of principle or racism, white opposition to affirmative action is the product of the desire to protect fellow whites.

### STUDY 1: ANTICIPATED GROUP OUTCOMES

A survey of 136 self-identified white men and women (mean age, 33.08 years) asked participants to indicate how they expected four hypothetical affirmative action policies to affect the hiring chances for whites and for minorities, using a scale from 1 (greatly harm) to 7 (greatly improve). Participants were also asked to indicate their support for each policy, using a scale from 1 (strongly oppose) to 7 (strongly support).

The policies varied with regard to strength—that is, the extent to which the policies weighed minority group status in selecting individuals for jobs. “Weak” policies gave no weight to minority status in making a hiring decision, whereas “strong” policies gave considerable weight to minority status in making a hiring decision. In order from weakest to strongest, the policies were: 1) an “outreach” policy that increases the number of minority applicants

**Table 1. Effect of Policy Strength on Whites' Policy Support, Perception of Harm to Whites, and Perception of Benefit to Minorities (Study 1)**

	Policy Strength			
	Weaker > ----- > Stronger			
	Outreach	Training	Tie-Break	Minimum Qualification
Level of support for policy	4.27	3.54	2.71	1.89
Level of perceived harm of policy to whites	4.25	4.56	5.39	5.89
Level of perceived benefit of policy to minorities	4.99	5.49	5.37	5.57

for a job but does not consider race in hiring; 2) a “training” policy that provides supplemental training to minority job applicants but does not consider race in hiring; 3) a “tie-break” policy that uses race as a tiebreaker in favor of minority applicants over equally qualified white applicants; and 4) a “minimum qualification” policy that allows a company to hire minorities as long as they meet a minimum level of qualifications even at the expense of more-qualified white applicants.

We found that opposition to affirmative action was better predicted by the policy’s anticipated harm to whites than by the policy’s anticipated benefit to minorities (Table 1). Moreover, support for affirmative action was lower for the stronger policies. This finding is typically interpreted as evidence for the principled opposition perspective. Further analyses found, however, that support dropped for stronger policies because these policies were perceived as causing greater harm to the in-group. This finding suggests that opposition framed in terms of “principled” opposition might really be a veiled attempt to protect the in-group.

Participants were not completely insensitive to minority outcomes. Once

they determined that policies would cause no harm to their in-group, their willingness to support them increased as their perception of their helpfulness to minorities rose (Figure 1).

**STUDY 2: WHITE RACIAL IDENTITY**

In a second study we recruited 57 self-identified white male and female university students (mean age, 20.50 years) and measured the strength of their racial identity. Participants with a high racial identity are individuals who are particularly interested in protecting their in-group; for such individuals, harm to the in-group is interpreted as harm to the self. To measure racial identity we asked participants to complete a commonly used racial identity measure (Sellers et al. 1997). Using a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), participants indicated their agreement with such statements as “I have a strong attachment to others of my race” and “My destiny is tied to the destiny of other people of my race.”

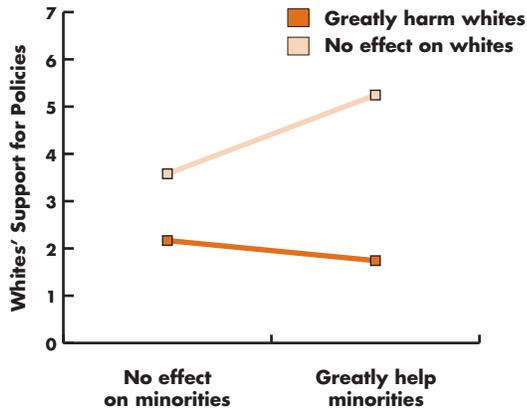
We also manipulated the purported effect of a recruitment policy on the racial composition of a fictitious organization by describing the policy as either increasing the representation of blacks or decreasing

the representation of whites. This was done to draw attention to either the benefit provided to minorities or the harm done to whites.

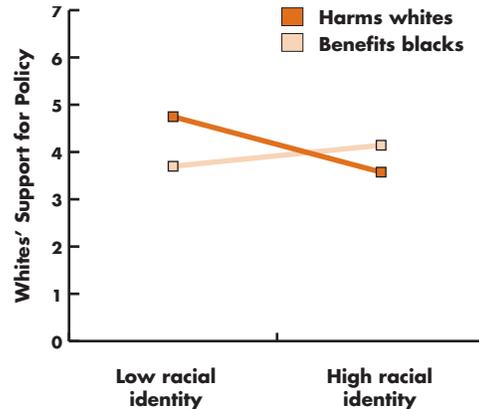
We found that whites with a high racial identity opposed affirmative action more when the policy was described as hurting whites than when it was described as benefiting blacks (Figure 2). In contrast, opposition among whites with a weak group identity was not affected by whether the policy was said to hurt whites or benefit blacks.

These results are consistent with the hypothesis that white opposition to affirmative action is rooted in a concern for protecting fellow whites. Importantly, these studies provide evidence that contemporary white opposition to affirmative action is not rooted in a desire to hurt minorities (as would be predicted by the racism perspective) or to protect the belief in meritocracy (as would be predicted by the principled opposition perspective). As such, it appears that previous research has underemphasized the role of group interest in generating opposition to affirmative action among whites.

**Figure 1. Whites' Support for Affirmative Action Policies, by Their Perceived Effect on Whites and Minorities (Study 1)**



**Figure 2. Whites' Support for a Recruitment Policy, by Its Perceived Effect on Whites or Blacks and Strength of White Racial Identity (Study 2)**



## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Educate the public.* Because whites tend, in error, to equate affirmative action with “strong” policies (Haley and Sidanius 2006; Kravitz and Platania 1993), clarify how affirmative action policies work at specific organizations. Explain that affirmative action is often a recruitment or supplemental training policy and that such policies do not adversely affect whites. Stress the value of affirmative action policies by drawing attention to the fact that these policies attempt to ameliorate existing social inequality that not only disadvantages minorities but also advantages whites.

2. *Continue to investigate dominant group identity and group interest.* A deeper understanding of the impact of whites’

racial identity on their social policy attitudes may shed light on strategies to increase the support for social policies intended to promote social justice (Lowery et al. forthcoming).

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Previous research on opposition to affirmative action policies has paid insufficient attention to the role of group interest. This brief suggests that white opposition to affirmative action is the product of the desire to protect fellow whites.

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