

Affirmative action critics paint Asian Americans as the 'model minority.' Why that's false

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Asian Americans are widely stereotyped as studious, smart and hard-working. As minorities who have managed to overcome racial obstacles to success. As evidence that affirmative action is no longer necessary—or, even, that it hurts the very types of students it's meant to

protect.

The U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments in two cases Monday challenging race-conscious admissions at Harvard and the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill in part on the grounds that they discriminate against Asian applicants. The plaintiffs, Students for Fair Admissions, argue that admissions officers at Harvard in particular, by subscribing to this "model minority" stereotype, hold Asian applicants to a higher standard and discriminate against such students in subjective portions of the application process.

Admitted students of Asian descent have higher standardized [test scores](#) than their peers, and a 2018 analysis of Harvard's admissions data conducted on behalf of the plaintiffs concluded Asian applicants are effectively penalized in subjective ratings of their personalities. Some students have said the perception of these biases compelled them to downplay their Asian identities on applications to Harvard and other elite schools.

But that doesn't necessarily mean affirmative action is to blame. There's a lot more to the issue than that. It's also important to remember that the lead architect of these cases—a man named Ed Blum who is neither a recent student nor Asian American—and other affirmative action critics tend to invoke those same stereotypes in condemning race-conscious admissions.

The argument that affirmative action categorically hurts Asian Americans rests on generalizations about the diverse racial group—that they tend to be high-achieving and well-off.

"Asian Americans are not your model minority, we are not a monolith in terms of our communities' needs, and can't be used against other communities of color—we can't allow that to happen," said Sally Chen, a

recent Harvard grad who testified on behalf of the university in the case's 2018 trial in a U.S. district court, in a recent call with reporters.

Chen, now a program manager at the San Francisco-based Chinese for Affirmative Action, was a first-generation [college](#) student, her parents immigrants from China who worked menial jobs, spoke limited English and raised the family of six in a one-bedroom apartment. Those circumstances fostered Chen's resilience, leadership skills and compassion for others—qualities that, records show, bolstered her application to the Ivy League institution.

"Having this context made me a much stronger applicant to college, maybe more than just numbers on a page," Chen said. "Asian Americans need affirmative action as well."

Asian American diversity

Among the approximately 23 million Americans of Asian descent, the largest ethnic groups are Chinese and Indian, with populations of roughly 5 million each, followed by Filipino (4.2 million), Vietnamese (2.2 million), Korean (1.9 million) and Japanese (1.5 million).

But the population is far more diverse. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders comprise more than 50 different ethnic groups with varying languages, immigration histories and educational experiences.

Asian American students typically score higher than their peers of other races on standardized tests such as the SAT. Among 2020 [high school graduates](#), for example, Asian students who took the SAT scored an average of 632 on the math section, compared with 547 for white students; the average math score overall was 523 (out of 800). Asian students also graduate from high school at higher rates, and with higher average GPAs.

Given these outcomes, it's perhaps unsurprising that Asian Americans attend the country's most selective colleges at higher rates than people of other races.

Especially in the past few years amid renewed attention on affirmative action, according to research published in May by the right-leaning Manhattan Institute, their share of the [student](#) populations at most of the Ivies has steadily grown—most notably at Princeton, Yale and the University of Pennsylvania. At Harvard, they account for more than a quarter of undergraduate students, compared with 5% of the U.S. public school population.

But the picture is more complicated. Elite colleges are a small subset of the U.S. higher education landscape, just as the Asian students who attend them are a small subset of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in U.S. higher education.

"The majority of Asian Americans going to college are not going to these über selective colleges," said Natasha Warikoo, a sociology professor who studies racial inequities in education and has written several relevant books, most recently "Is Affirmative Action Fair? The Myth of Equity in College." "This is true of all racial groups because so few students go to these colleges in general. ... This idea that all Asian Americans are trying to get into Harvard just isn't true."

A analysis published in 2020 found that roughly half of Asian American undergraduates attend community colleges or for-profit colleges. In California, home to the country's largest AAPI population and a 26-year ban on affirmative action, the vast majority of Asian Americans—90%—begin college in one of California's public community colleges or four-year universities.

An analysis of the 23-campus California State University System further

illustrates the nuances. In 2016, the four-year completion rate for the university system's roughly 78,000 AAPI students was 3% below that for all students. Only a few ethnic subgroups—Japanese and Asian Indians—had four-year completion rates that exceeded the average, and all subgroups were less likely than whites to complete their degrees in four years.

Meanwhile, a 2022 study of the nine-campus University of California found, for example, that Filipino, Thai, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and Laotian students are admitted at below-average rates and that many AAPI groups, including Samoans and Chamorros, are underrepresented in the system.

Indeed, college attainment varies significantly within the AAPI community. While more than half of Japanese and Korean Americans—and nearly three in four Asian Indian Americans—age 24 or older had a bachelor's degree or higher in 2019, the same was true for fewer than one in five their Laotian, Hmong and Cambodian counterparts.

Similar disparities exist when it comes to income levels. An analysis of data from the Common App, a college admissions application used by more than 900 institutions, found that certain AAPI students are far more likely to have the application cost waived for income reasons. (Submitting the Common App costs \$55 per college on average.)

Roughly 60% of applicants identifying their background as "Other South Asia"—Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi and Nepali, for example—received a Common App waiver, according to the analysis. The same was true for just 9% of those identifying as Japanese.

Is it harder for Asian students to get into college?

Most U.S. higher education institutions give little or no consideration to applicants' race. But at institutions that do consider race as a factor, there's an argument to be made that Asian applicants are held to higher standards.

Some data has suggested admitted students of Asian descent have higher test scores and lower acceptance rates. The number of Asian students applying to elite schools has grown significantly in recent decades.

Supporters, however, say affirmative action benefits many Asian Americans, particularly those who belong to underrepresented ethnic groups or those who've experienced hardship as people of color.

Thang Diep is Vietnamese immigrant and now Harvard alumnus who testified on behalf of the university in 2018. Age 19 at the time, Diep explained that he faced discrimination growing up in Los Angeles, raised by parents who didn't attend college themselves.

Diep argued he got into Harvard thanks to affirmative action, releasing part of his application ahead of the October 2018 trial. His SAT scores were on "the lower end" of the Harvard average, but he had "perfect grades," the admissions officers noted, and perhaps most importantly a "warm energy," "a deep interest in the arts and social impact" and a "truly unusual" "openness to new ideas and new people."

It's also worth noting that, compared with white students, relatively few Asian students at elite colleges are legacy admits or athletes.

Why do the affirmative action lawsuits focus on Asian American students?

More than two in three Asian Americans—69%—support affirmative

action, and that's been the case for nearly a decade. Within that demographic, support is highest among Korean Americans and Asian Indian Americans (at least 80%) and lowest among Chinese Americans, 59% of whom say they favor such policies.

Despite that polling data and widespread Asian American activism in support of affirmative action, Students for Fair Admissions—whose conservative donors have engaged in a larger crusade targeting issues including voting rights—have sought to paint a different picture. They are, critics say, using Asian Americans as a wedge to incite infighting among communities of color.

According to Tuft's Warikoo, the cases against Harvard and UNC rest in part on "this crazy false equivalence."

"If you're worried about the 'personal rating,' ending the consideration of race for these other groups isn't going to change those biases," Warikoo said, referring to the qualitative portion of Harvard's admissions process. "Even if there is discrimination happening, how is removing [affirmative action](#) going to solve it?"

Affirmative action has been banned in nine states, whose most selective public colleges have seen drops in their numbers of Black, Hispanic and Native American students. Research has even shown such bans are correlated with sizable reductions in the number of underrepresented minorities in medical schools.

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