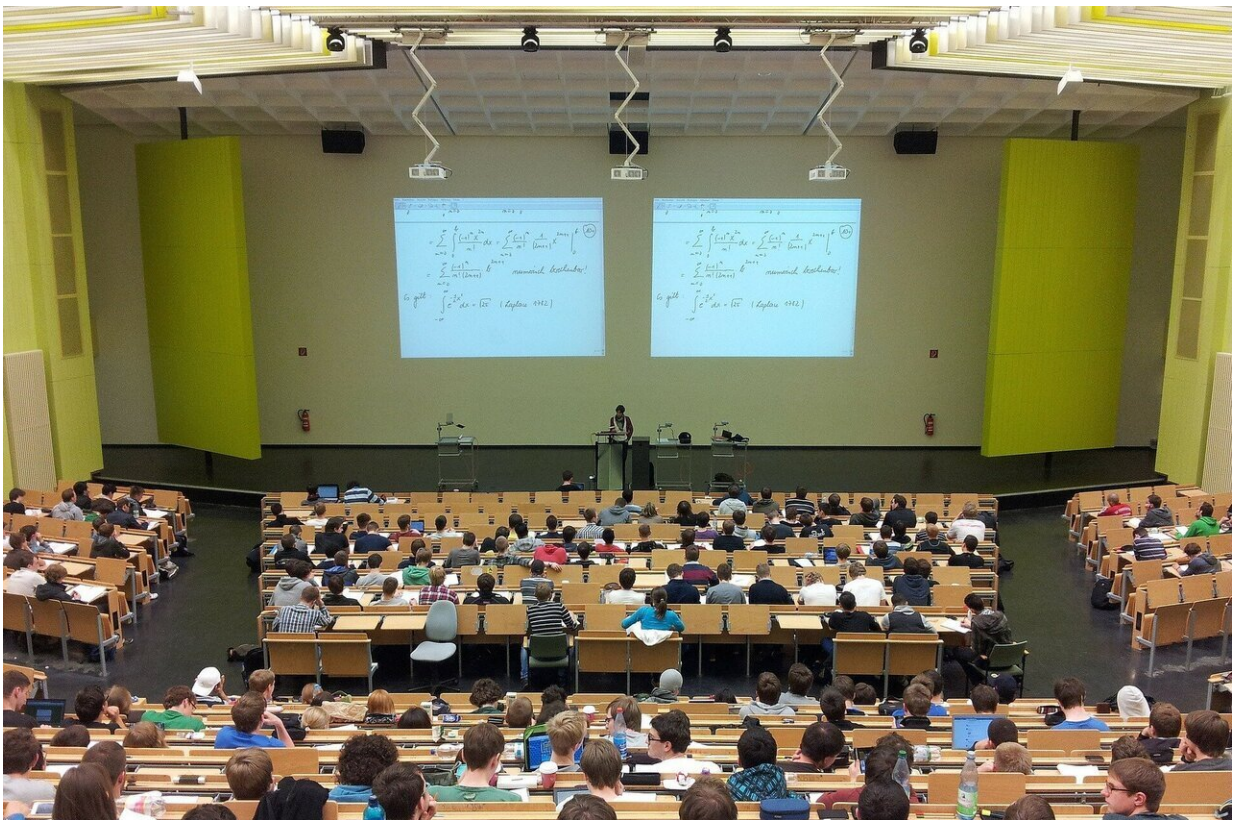


Affirmative action policies to increase diversity are successful, but controversial, around the world

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In a landmark judgment in June 2023, the US supreme court ruled against the use of race-conscious admissions in colleges and universities.

This decision marked a controversial end to [affirmative action](#) in US higher education admissions.

Race-conscious admissions policies at American universities have a history that goes back to the 1960s [civil rights movement](#). These policies aimed to increase the number of students from underrepresented groups and build more racially diverse student populations.

Writing for the [supreme court](#) majority opinion, Chief Justice John Roberts [wrote](#) that many universities have "concluded, wrongly, that the touchstone of an individual's identity is not challenges bested, skills built, or lessons learned but the color of their skin."

But the US is not the only country with policies to correct or compensate for ethnic, religious or [racial discrimination](#). Our [working paper](#) compares the varying types and success of these policies around the world.

Affirmative action is a relatively recent tool for most countries, with policies [gaining momentum](#) from the 1990s onwards, particularly in politics. This was followed by public sector employment and education in the 2000s, and later by private sector employment in the 2010s.

Affirmative action policies can include ["soft" measures](#) designed to increase minority representation in a candidate pool. For instance, language in job postings that signals a commitment to diversity and encourages minority applicants.

They may also include "hard" measures, such as direct consideration of minority status in admissions or hiring decisions, or implementing quotas in national legislative bodies. New Zealand's "Māori seats," which give government representation to the indigenous Māori people, are an example of this.

Differences around the world

In Europe, "[positive action](#)" is a more common term than affirmative action. In some contexts, "positive discrimination" is [understood as a synonym](#) for both.

In some countries, there is a sharp distinction between terms. In [Great Britain](#), employers are allowed to take positive action that may involve "treating one group that shares a protected characteristic more favorably than others." This may mean providing targeted job training programs. Positive discrimination, such as hiring a less-qualified candidate because she is from an underrepresented group, is prohibited under the Equality Act.

[India](#) is known as the first country to adopt affirmative action policies. The heart of Indian affirmative action lies in the reservation system. This system "reserves" spots in government employment, governing bodies, and educational admissions for "[scheduled castes and tribes](#)" and other marginalized groups. This system has roots in similar practices during the colonial period.

Following its independence, India continued the reservation system through its [1950 constitution](#) and subsequent amendment in 1951. These provisions ensured the representation of historically marginalized castes and tribes not just in politics, but also in employment and education sectors through set quotas. India later expanded these initiatives to "other backward classes" and "economically weaker sections."

Like affirmative action in the US, India's reservation system has been subject to intense debate. Members of groups not benefiting from reservations have publicly [criticized](#) the ethnic- and class-based quotas. Critics argue that these measures promote unfair preferences and reverse discrimination.

But the two countries have taken [starkly different routes](#) in how they handled this contentious issue. In the US, court decisions progressively led to softening or abolishing affirmative action programs. In [India](#), faced with similar court rulings, a series of constitutional amendments have preserved reservations.

Does affirmative action work?

With colleagues, we built a [global dataset](#) of affirmative action policies around the world. We also conducted a [systematic review of the literature](#) to determine whether they are successful.

We found that 63% of the 194 studies we reviewed concluded that affirmative action programs indeed served to improve outcomes for ethnic, religious or racial minorities. These measures helped the target groups gain better education and employment outcomes, as well as foster meaningful political participation.

Nevertheless, as the US and India show, affirmative action is often deeply controversial. Regardless of what the research shows about the success of these policies, they are often met with protest and resistance.

In over half of the countries we studied, national [protests](#) and [civic action](#) emerged in support of or against the conduct of affirmative action policies. And almost one in five saw [violent incidents](#) or riots directly linked to the introduction and implementation of affirmative action policies.

Governments hoping to implement or expand affirmative action programs should consider these effects.

In her [dissenting opinion](#), US supreme court justice Sonia Sotomayor argued that affirmative action is a necessary corrective to advance

equality. So, what can be done to shift public discourse and build support for these programs?

In the US, recent [public opinion polls](#) suggest significant opposition to racial preferences in hiring decisions. The same polling shows strong support for equal opportunity and diversity. This suggests that the way forward may be to pursue soft over hard [affirmative action](#) measures—encouraging diversity without implementing quotas.

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