



Reports

Are admissions decisions based on family ties fairer than those that consider race? Social dominance orientation and attitudes toward legacy vs. affirmative action policies

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ABSTRACT

This paper tests the competing hypotheses that social dominance orientation (SDO) reflects a specific desire to protect ingroup interests vs. a general desire to maintain status hierarchies by examining attitudes toward hierarchy-enhancing (i.e., legacy) and hierarchy-attenuating (i.e., affirmative action) selection policies. Study 1 found that social dominance orientation (SDO) was positively related to support for legacy policies and negatively related to support for affirmative action. In a more direct test of the ingroup interest vs. general dominance hypotheses, Study 2 found that among Asian participants, SDO is negatively related to policy support when a legacy policy is perceived to benefit the ingroup (i.e., fellow Asians); however, when the policy is perceived to benefit the dominant group (i.e., Whites), SDO is positively related to support. In all, these findings suggest that attitudes toward selection policies depend not on their specific content or effects on the ingroup, but rather on their impact on status hierarchies.

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Introduction

A large body of literature has examined people's attitudes toward affirmative action policies (Bobo, 2000; Dovidio & Gartner, 1996; Sears, Hetts, Sidanius, & Bobo, 2000; Lowery, Unzueta, Knowles, & Goff, 2006). Intended to increase the representation of underrepresented groups in higher education and in the workplace, affirmative action is a collection of policies that take into consideration racial group membership in hiring and admissions decisions (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002). Although examining individuals' reactions to affirmative action is important, examining reactions to other selection policies like legacy admissions policies may provide insight into people's underlying motivations for supporting or opposing such policies.

Previous research suggests that opposition to affirmative action policies is motivated by principled motives (Sniderman & Piazza, 1993). Scholars contend that although racism once influenced attitudes toward affirmative action, opposition is now driven by race-neutral values such as fairness and merit (Carmines & Merriman, 1993; Sniderman, Crosby, & Howell, 2000). In the present paper we challenge the view that meritocratic principles are the only source of opposition to policies that provide opportunities on the basis of beneficiaries' group membership. Although some opponents of affirmative action may legitimately oppose these policies on the premise that they violate meritocracy –

i.e., the ideal that people should be rewarded based only on competence and effort rather than group membership (Bobocel, Son Hing, Davey, Stanley, & Zanna, 1998; Heilman, Battle, Keller, & Lee, 1998) – we argue that there may be others who, consistent with their desire to maintain social inequality, differentially support policies that deviate from meritocracy. To test this hypothesis we examine reactions to two policies that grant selection preferences to individuals based on group membership: legacy policies and affirmative action.

What are legacy policies?

Legacy policies give an admissions boost to children and grandchildren of university alumni (Ladewski, 2010). Given that legacy admissions are based on past patterns of university enrollment, legacy preferences disproportionately benefit White applicants, whose parents are more likely than parents of racial minority applicants to have attended universities (Lamb, 1993). Studies suggest that applicants whose parents graduated from a university are 45% more likely to gain admission over applicants with no familial connection to the university in question; applicants who have a sibling, aunt, uncle or grandparent who graduated from a university are 14% more likely to be admitted relative to someone with no legacy status (Hurwitz, 2011).

How legacy policies may differ from affirmative action policies

One reason why people may react differently to legacy vs. affirmative action policies is that these policies have opposing consequences

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for racial equality. Whereas affirmative action policies promote equality by attempting to reduce racial gaps in access to jobs and educational opportunities (Blumer, 1958; Bobo, 1998; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), legacy policies could be thought of as promoting inequality by primarily benefitting members of the dominant racial group (i.e., Whites; Ladewski, 2010). Given that affirmative action and legacy policies may have distinct consequences for the racial hierarchy, people's social dominance orientation (SDO) – i.e., the degree to which individuals desire inequality between social groups (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) – may differentially predict support for these policies. Specifically, if such policies are, in fact, thought to have opposing effects on racial equality, then SDO should predict opposition to hierarchy-attenuating affirmative action policies and support for hierarchy-enhancing legacy policies.

The present research

In the present research we examine whether the differential effect of legacy and affirmative action policies on the racial hierarchy affects people's support for such policies. In Study 1, we assess people's support for legacy vs. affirmative action as a function of SDO. Consistent with social dominance theory (Sidanius, Liu, Pratto, & Shaw, 1994; van Laar, Sidanius, Rabinowitz, & Sinclair, 1999), we argue that support for these policies reflects individuals' desire to preserve or minimize racial inequality regardless of whether such policies actually benefit the ingroup. To this end, in Study 2 we directly assess whether SDO reflects a general desire to maintain inequality (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) or a specific desire to protect ingroup interests (Lehmiller & Schmitt, 2007; Schmitt, Branscombe, & Kappen, 2003) by manipulating the purported beneficiaries of legacy admission policies.

Study 1

Study 1 tested the hypothesis that a desire to preserve the racial hierarchy differentially influences people's attitudes towards legacy vs. affirmative action policies. Consistent with past research, we expect to find that affirmative action is opposed as a function of SDO (Pratto et al., 1994). Conversely, given that legacy policies are likely to reinforce the racial hierarchy by overwhelmingly benefitting Whites (Ladewski, 2010), we expect to find a positive relationship between legacy policy support and SDO.

Participants

Eighty participants (51 women, 29 men) were recruited from an online participant database maintained at UCLA (38 Asians, 36 Whites, 4 Latinos, 2 participants indicated more than one racial identity). The age ranged from 18 to 36 ($M = 20.76$, $SD = 2.87$). Participants were paid \$2 for their participation.

Procedure

Participants were told that they would be completing two unrelated surveys. Participants first completed an SDO measure, which was described as a survey of individuals' views of groups in society. The second survey was described as a survey of individuals' policy views. Participants were randomly assigned to evaluate either a legacy or an affirmative action policy. In the legacy condition, participants read a vignette indicating that Ivy League schools and other major universities, including UCLA¹, currently use a legacy admissions policy; this policy was described as giving children and grandchildren of

alumni a “nudge” in the admissions process (see Appendix A). In the affirmative action condition, participants read a similar vignette but the term “legacy” was substituted with “affirmative action” and the beneficiaries of this policy were described as “university applicants who are underrepresented at a particular institution” (see Appendix B). Participants were then asked to indicate their support for the policy.

Measures

Social dominance orientation

SDO was measured using an eight-item scale (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Participants were asked to indicate how negatively or positively they felt about various items. Sample items include: “If certain groups stayed in their place, we would have fewer problems” and “It's probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom” (1 = very negative, 7 = very positive; $\alpha = .93$; $M = 2.43$, $SD = .94$).

Policy support

To assess participants' policy support, they were asked to respond to the following items: “How fair do you think is this policy?” (1 = not fair at all, 7 = very fair), “To what extent do you agree or disagree that this policy is legitimate and should be continued?” (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), “How much do you oppose or support the policy that you read in the previous screen?” (1 = strongly oppose, 7 = strongly support), “This admissions policy will help admit highly qualified individuals,” “UCLA will be a much better place if this policy continues to be used in the admissions process,” “Given that university rankings are based on the caliber of students that attend an institution, UCLA will continue to increase in rankings with this admissions policy,” “As a future alumnus of UCLA, I am more likely to be engaged in university activities if UCLA continues to use this admissions policy than if it were to discontinue its use,” “If money is no obstacle in the future, I will donate money to UCLA if it continues to use this admissions policy” (1 = strongly disagree, 7 strongly agree; $\alpha = .92$; $M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.16$).

Results

No effects of gender or race were found. As such, we collapsed across these variables. The policy support variable was regressed on Policy Type, SDO, and the interaction between these two variables. This analysis revealed a significant main effect of SDO, $b = 1.54$, $SE b = .40$, $\beta = 1.23$, $t(79) = 3.83$, and $p < .001$, and a non-significant main effect of Policy Type, $b = .36$, $SE b = .24$, $\beta = .16$, $t(79) = 1.50$, and $p = .14$. More importantly, this analysis revealed a significant Policy Type \times SDO interaction, $b = -1.04$, $SE b = .26$, $\beta = -1.33$, $t(79) = -4.08$, $p < .001$, and $R^2 = .19$.

To decompose this interaction we conducted simple slope analyses. These analyses revealed a significant positive relationship between policy support and SDO in the legacy condition, $b = 0.50$, $SE b = 0.18$, $t(76) = 2.80$, and $p < .01$. Conversely, there was a significant negative relationship between policy support and SDO in the affirmative action condition, $b = -0.54$, $SE b = .18$, $t(76) = -2.97$, and $p < .01$.

Discussion

Study 1 uncovered a positive relationship between SDO and policy support in the legacy condition, a finding consistent with the idea that people motivated to preserve status hierarchies support policies that reinforce racial inequality by benefitting the dominant racial group. Conversely, and consistent with past research, SDO was negatively associated with support for hierarchy-attenuating affirmative action policies – i.e., policies that benefit minority group members.

Although the present findings are consistent with the idea that dominance motives predict support for legacy admissions preferences

¹ Participants were debriefed with UCLA's admissions policy and told that UCLA does not grant preferential treatment on the basis of an applicant's family ties (i.e., legacy) or race (i.e., affirmative action).

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