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The impact of Israel's class-based affirmative action policy on admission and academic outcomes[☆]

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ABSTRACT

In the early to mid-2000s, four flagship Israeli selective universities introduced a voluntary need-blind and color-blind affirmative action policy for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The program allowed departments to offer admission to academically borderline applicants who were above a certain threshold of disadvantage. We examine the effect of eligibility for affirmative action on admission and enrollment outcomes as well as on academic achievement using a regression discontinuity (RD) design. We show that students who were just barely eligible for this voluntary policy had a significantly higher probability of admission and enrollment, as compared to otherwise similar students. The affirmative action program also led to higher rates of admission to the most selective majors. Moreover, after enrollment, AA-eligible students are not falling behind academically, even at the most selective majors. Our results suggest the potential for a long-lasting impact of class-based preferences in admission on social and economic mobility.

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1. Introduction

In the United States, the term “affirmative action” has been synonymous with preference policies based on race and ethnicity. Today, however, due to the growing controversy around these policies and the recent Supreme Court rulings, affirmative action policy in U.S. higher education may be embarking on a new path. In Fisher vs. University of Texas (2013), the Supreme Court affirmed the importance of diversity on college campuses, but instructed that universities may take race and ethnicity into account during admissions only after race-neutral

solutions have been thoroughly exhausted. In light of the strict scrutiny imposed by the court, elite universities that employ affirmative action will likely seek new and creative ways to achieve campus diversity in the coming years.¹ An obvious alternative to affirmative action policies based on race are those based on class—that is, policies that give an edge in college admissions to the socioeconomically disadvantaged. The problem, however, is that we know very little about class-based affirmative action in the U.S. because, with the exception of sporadic experiments, it has never been implemented.

Looking beyond the U.S. experience, there is one country that offers a large-scale, race-neutral, class-based affirmative action policy for scrutiny—the first of its kind, in fact, to ever be implemented in university admissions

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¹ Affirmative action bans have also been introduced in states such as California, Texas, and Michigan. See [Hinrichs \(2010\)](#) and [Long \(2004a\)](#) for analyses of the impacts of affirmative action bans.

worldwide: Israel.² This program puts forward a distinctive—and theoretically attractive—design. It is completely race-neutral and also need-blind. That is, in evaluating the eligibility of applicants, neither their financial status nor their ethnic origins are considered. Rather, the emphasis is on structural determinants of disadvantage, specifically neighborhood socioeconomic status and high school rigor (though certain individual hardships are also weighed). The objective of Israel's class-based affirmative action policy, as with race-based affirmative action policies, is to diversify the student body of elite schools and pave the way for social and economic mobility among disadvantaged populations.

However, the potential of the Israeli program to achieve these twofold goals can materialize only if the institutions, especially the more prestigious departments within them, give an actual edge in admissions to applicants from disadvantaged background that were found eligible (note that the application and admission processes in Israel are major-specific). Getting into a selective major is an important outcome of the Israeli class-based affirmative program because applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds, like Arabs, Jews from Asia-Africa origin, poor, and those from the geographical periphery, are under-represented in the more selective fields within the first-tier universities (Alon, 2011). In addition to this potential diversity dividend of the affirmative action policy, getting into a selective major is an important indicator for its promise to boost social and economic mobility because, in Israel as is in other countries—in the U.S., for example, studies show that college major is the most important determinant of future earnings, even after controlling for ability (Arcidiacono, 2004; Roksa & Levey, 2010)—major selectivity determines future prospects like economic payoffs, prestige, and power. Consequently, because preferences under the Israeli program are voluntary, each academic department has discretion of whether and whom to admit, it is important to examine the effect of this program on the likelihood of admission, and especially on admission into selective majors.

Admittedly, the causal effect of affirmative action policies on admission outcomes is not particularly interesting for policies based on quotas where the admission decision is mechanical, such as, India's reservation policy (Bertrand, Hanna, & Mullainathan, 2010; Bagde, Epple, & Taylor, 2011; Robles & Krishna, 2012). But whether affirmative action (hereafter AA) applicants get an edge in admissions is an important question in settings where the policy is voluntary, as in the U.S. and Israel.³ Still,

² Affirmative action policies have been implemented in South Africa and India but these programs are race- or caste-based and therefore do not necessarily shed light on class-based affirmative action. Brazil did implement a new class-based affirmative action policy in 2012 (Almeida-Filho, 2012; Guimaraes, 2010; Jeter, 2003; Telles, 2009); yet, its relevance to the future of affirmative action policy in the U.S. will be limited because it is not race-neutral and also uses quotas, a practice that is unconstitutional in the U.S.

³ It is important in the United States because the "flexibility" in admissions endorsed by the Supreme Court rulings in the Gratz vs. Bollinger and Grutter vs. Bollinger cases upholding preferences for minorities only if they are achieved in a flexible non-mechanical way.

the assessment of what may seem to be a trivial question has been impeded by several problems in the U.S. context. One issue is the difficulty in identifying AA applicants and admits in datasets. Studies dealing with affirmative action in the U.S. generally use race or ethnicity as a proxy for AA eligibility in determining admission likelihood given academic achievements.⁴ Race and ethnicity, however, are not perfect indicators for AA eligibility because not every minority applicant receives an edge in admissions.⁵ The other issue that makes it difficult to assess the causal effect of AA eligibility on admission decisions is the holistic nature of admission decisions at elite American institutions.⁶ This means that even the most detailed empirical specifications cannot fully characterize the applicant's admissibility as seen by admissions officers in the U.S. As a result, comparing AA admits to other students with similar observed characteristics can be misleading because of unobserved omitted variables that influence the likelihood of admission.

In this study we use the Israeli program to obtain causal estimates for the effect of a voluntary admission policy on admission and enrollment rates, especially for the more competitive majors. We exploit the structure of the Israeli program which has a discontinuity in the eligibility for the program and therefore allows for a regression discontinuity (RD) design. Comparing applicants just above and just below the cutoff point of eligibility enables us to hold constant all other observed and unobserved differences between AA and non-AA applicants. Moreover this investigation benefits from the rich dataset based on applicants' transcripts and the institutions' decisions, especially the information on the choice of major and the individual's affirmative action status. Another aspect that strengthens the causal inference is the formulaic admission process in Israeli universities implies that we have access to almost all the application information which determined admission to university. Finally, we take advantage of the fact that both the application and admission processes are major-specific to link affirmative action to the selection into fields of study.

The design of the Israeli program and the availability of detailed data also provide an opportunity to assess the causal effect of this affirmative action policy on the success

⁴ For example, in the most comprehensive study on the topic, Bowen and Bok (1998) report that approximately 42 percent of black applicants were admitted as compared to 25 percent of the white applicants in their sample of selective institutions. Other studies confirm this pattern showing that, after controlling for scholastic performance in high school and family background, black and Hispanic students are more likely to be admitted to elite institutions in the U.S. (Alon & Tienda, 2007; Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Kane, 1998; Long, 2004b).

⁵ In particular, highly qualified minority applicants do not need an edge in admission while minority athletes may be admitted because of preference for athletes, not because of preferences for blacks and Hispanics (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Shulman & Bowen, 2002).

⁶ In the complex process of picking and choosing, admission officers are "admitting the candidate who seems to offer something special by way of drive and determination, the individual with a set of skills that matches well the academic requirements of the institution, someone who will bring another dimension of diversity to the student body, or a candidate who helps the institution fulfill a particular aspect of its mission" (Bowen & Bok, 1998:29).

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