



The diversity dividends of a need-blind and color-blind affirmative action policy

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ABSTRACT

In the early to mid-2000s, four flagship Israeli selective universities incorporated a *need-blind* and *color-blind* affirmative action policy into their admissions practices. The program, which gives an edge in admission to academically borderline applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds, emphasizes structural disadvantages, such as neighborhood socioeconomic status and high school rigor. The results of this study, based on administrative data from the four universities, demonstrate that having such a policy in place made the four institutions, especially the echelons at the most selective departments, more diverse than they otherwise would have been. The rise in geographic, economic and demographic diversity of a student population suggests that the plan's focus on structural determinants of disadvantage yields broad diversity dividends. The paper discusses the relevance of the findings to the ongoing discussion of admission regimes, diversity and equality of opportunity in the US.

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1. Introduction

The continuing public discontent with race-conscious admissions in the US – echoing similar claims in India, Brazil, South Africa and other countries – and the ban on such preferences in several states have motivated the search for race-neutral admission alternatives. The past decade brought the implementation of percent plans in Texas, California and Florida, alongside growing interest in propositions based on class preference. However, the shortcomings of these propounded alternatives (Bowen et al., 2005; Espenshade and Radford, 2009; Kane, 1998; Kurlaender and Grodsky, 2010; Tienda, 2010; The US Commission on Civil Rights, 2002), together with the rising class inequality in higher education in recent decades (Alon, 2009), suggest that the quest for innovative race-neutral ways to increase demographic, socioeconomic and geographical diversity at selective postsecondary institutions is not over.

The current study contributes to the rich scholarship on admission regimes and preferences by evaluating a unique policy of class-based affirmative action used at four flagship Israeli universities since the early to mid-2000s. The program promotes preferential treatment of academically borderline applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds. The most theoretically attractive aspect of this policy, however, is its distinctive design: neither the students' financial constraints nor their national or ethnic origins are considered. The emphasis, rather, is on students' structural disadvantages, such as neighborhood socioeconomic status and high school rigor.

In Israel, like in other countries, socioeconomic and national/ethnic origin inequalities are intertwined with spatial inequality. Consequently, this program serves as a natural experiment that tests the extent of this entanglement. Specifically, it demonstrates whether and how much a *need-blind* and *color-blind* affirmative action policy can increase geographic, economic and demographic diversity within a student population, and whether the diversification effects are uniform across

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different levels of selectivity. The conclusions reached here about the effectiveness of an *existing* program of class-based affirmative action, and the scope of its dividends in terms of diversity, have far-reaching significance for the design of preferential treatment policies, especially in light of the controversy concerning admission practices in the US. The universal relevance of these findings is considered, while taking into account the differences between the US and Israeli postsecondary systems, as well as in the judicial standing of preferential treatment policies.

2. Diversity and alternative admission models

Diversification of selective colleges and universities is necessary because they are bastions of privilege (Alon, 2009; Alon and Tienda, 2007; Bowen and Bok, 1998; Bowen et al., 2005; Karabel, 2005; The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), 2006). US Justice Powell, the pivotal opinion in the Bakke case, outlined the educational foundation for the “diversity rationale.” He argued that a diverse student body broadens the range of viewpoints collectively held by those students and subsequently, allows a university to provide an atmosphere that is “conducive to speculation, experiment and creation – so essential to the quality of higher education.” Since then, ample research has demonstrated the educational benefits of campus diversity (see Milem et al., 2005). A rise in student body diversity is associated with better learning experiences for all students and more opportunities for interaction with students from different backgrounds. This increases students’ tolerance to a wide range of viewpoints and enhances their cognitive and identity development, preparing them for better participation in a democratic society.

Justice Powell concluded that race-conscious admissions practices, when narrowly tailored, serve a compelling educational interest. The US Supreme Court ruling in 2003, in the two cases regarding the University of Michigan, enacted this rationale but made it clear that affirmative action should be a temporary remedy. The practice of affirmative action in higher education admissions was thus deemed permissible because it is believed to yield educational benefits by assembling a student body with diverse talents and perspectives (Gurin et al., 2002). Yet, despite evidence of the demographic diversification effects of race-conscious admissions on elite campuses (Alon and Tienda, 2005, 2007; Bowen and Bok, 1998), there is growing opposition to these practices. One of the main criticisms of the preferential treatment of racial and ethnic minorities in admissions is that they promote applicants who are “not deserving” because they take into account *group* identity rather than individual circumstances (Clayton and Tangri, 1989). The rising discontent has led to public referenda against the use of race-sensitive admissions, such as Proposition 209 in California, Initiative I-200 in Washington State, and, most recently, Proposal 2 in Michigan and Arizona Proposal 107. It has also resulted in judicial bans on racial preferences in higher education admissions in Texas and Florida, as well as numerous lawsuits against affirmative action practices in higher education (*Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003) and *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) are the most notable).

States that have banned race-conscious admission practices have since undertaken alternative approaches. Texas, Florida and California, for example, have adopted various forms of percent plans, programs that admit a fixed percentage of each school’s class rank distribution. The percent plans were designed to broaden college access across economic, demographic, geographic and social groups in the absence of race-based preferences. The cumulative evidence from Texas, California, and Florida indicates that a uniform admission regime cannot increase ethno-racial diversity, even in predominantly minority and residentially segregated states, without race-sensitive outreach to students at high schools with low college-going rates and without generous financial support (Grodsky and Kurlaender, 2010; Tienda, 2010; The US Commission on Civil Rights, 2002).

Under the Texas H.B. 588 law, for example, applicants who graduate in the top decile of their senior class are guaranteed admission to the public postsecondary school of their choice regardless of their standardized test scores. Although the enactment of this Plan in Texas was followed by an increase in racial and ethnic diversity in the state’s flagship institutions, Harris and Tienda (2010) show that the effect was the result of changes in the size and composition of high school graduation cohorts rather than the policy. Moreover, while the plan was successful in broadening geographic diversity (Long et al., 2010), it failed to augment socioeconomic diversity (Koffman and Tienda, 2008; Tienda et al., 2010).¹ Another problem with the uniform admission regime that Texas put in place is that the University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin) became saturated with applicants eligible for automatic admission, thus limiting the university’s ability to craft a class and achieve its institutional goals (Tienda, 2010).² Moreover, critics of the law, mostly suburban whites, continue to argue that the plan gives unjust advantage to “undeserving” applicants, claiming that low-ranked students from academically rigorous high schools are often more qualified than those from low performing high schools who are guaranteed college admission. Thus, despite the initial appeal of a uniform admission regime, the Texas Top 10% policy has become just as controversial as the race-conscious system it replaced (Tienda, 2010).

As the voices objecting to racial preferences became louder in recent years, another race-neutral alternative to diversifying the collective college student body has been proposed: preference plans based on socioeconomic class, either in addition

¹ Likewise, the ban on the consideration of race in admissions in California resulted in a decline in minority enrollment at the most selective University of California campuses and at some of the more selective California State University schools (Grodsky and Kurlaender, 2010). The talented 20 plan in Florida did not produce racial and ethnic diversity at the two most selective campuses in the state’s university system, the University of Florida (UF) and Florida State University (FSU), since it benefitted white and Asian students more than blacks and Hispanics (The US Commission on Civil Rights, 2002).

² After the Top 10% bill was revised by the Texas legislature in 2009, UT-Austin was required to fill only 75% of its freshman slots with eligible seniors.

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