Attitudes towards Affirmative Action: When Race and Education Collide

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This study will examine the controversial topic of Affirmative Action and its relation to common variables such as race and educational attainment. Prior research suggests that race and education are contributing factors on attitudes towards affirmative. Additionally, this study uses 1,660 cases taken from the 2006 General Social Survey to produce data for examining these relationships. The findings maintain that race and education play a significant role in attitudes towards affirmative action. This role is indicative of the causal relationship which provides support to the hypotheses that race affects attitudes towards affirmative action and that different levels of education contribute to differences in support or opposition of affirmative action.

Key Words: Affirmative Action; Degrees of Freedom; Chi-Square


Introduction

As surprising as it may seem, in the twenty-first century, race plays a key role in determining the ability of an individual to succeed. For this reason policies in affirmative action are commonly disputed and discussed. Affirmative action and programs based on its principles aim to remove race as a factor in hiring or admissions policies. Though efforts have been made since the 1800’s to limit institutional segregation, there remain strong social factors that contribute to the limited success of programs for racial equality. These programs have dealt with inequality based on race in the workplace and in education. In these two areas, education and employment, application processes that factor in race appear to be the issue. Therefore, race is vitally important to everyone who lives in the American capitalist economy where success through employment status or increased human capital is often determined as the most valuable part of life. Furthermore, without admission to educational systems or employment, it is highly unlikely for a person to succeed in the western society. One key and controversial development as a result of discrimination is affirmative action (Crosby 2003, Crosby 1994 and Knight 2005). The most accurate operational definition of affirmative action is any action by an organization that puts forth additional effort to ensure equality of its practices by not valuing one racial group over any other (Crosby 1994). Affirmative action has altered hiring policies and affected college admissions (Crosby 2003 and Sax 1999). It has resulted in the development of both positive and negative emotions about whether or not the system is fair and just and thus contributed to their attitudes towards affirmative action programs. To fully understand the opinions of persons regarding this topic it is necessary to discuss the association that has been found to exist between race and attitudes about affirmative action (Aberson, Haag 2003; Federico, Sidanius 2002). Additionally, there is a connection between these two variables and that is the level of education.
acquired by the judging individual (Sax and Arrendondo 1999). The attitudes of individuals on affirmative action varies depending on the years of education obtained by them and it has been found that the higher the educational level of the individual the more positively their attitudes will be about affirmative action (Knight and Hebl 2005; Aberson and Haag 2003). These correlates are significant to the development of attitudes on whether or not affirmative action is just, reasonable, or productive. And in this manner, affirmative action impacts everyone.

**Literature Review**

With the current economic crisis in the United States it is perhaps more important than ever to analyze the strain placed on individuals across the social structure. In a capitalist economy it is extremely important for persons to be independently responsible for their own success. Unfortunately, this success may be affected by an individual’s political perspective. These political perspectives, or attitudes as I will further refer to them, invade all areas of the economy. Individuals, groups, and cultures can be more likely to have specific attitudes on the ways in which political situations are to be handled. Many studies have noted a profound correlation between the race of an individual and his/her attitudes about affirmative action and this relationship is additionally variable across differing degrees of educated persons (Aberson and Haag 2003; Harrison, Kravitz, Mayer, Leslie and Dalit 2006). The primary link here is that there are tendencies of certain races to have different attitudes about these policies. Due to this phenomenon it is extremely important to investigate the effect of race, especially across blacks and whites, on the attitudes about Affirmative Action; as will be visible throughout this study.

One theory that has been applied to understand the relationship of race and attitudes about affirmative action is that of Group Self-Interest theory (Sax and Arrendondo 1999). This theory has been applied to develop an understanding between the link of race (namely blacks and
whites) and attitudes about Affirmative action (Glaser 2001). The theory maintains that individuals or even groups of individuals make decisions and develop opinions based on self-interest (Sax and Arrendondo 1999). That is, an individual is likely to agree with policies that will benefit them explicitly; and groups would be supportive of a program that benefits their race. For example, during African American civil rights crises in America, whites were likely to oppose programs that assisted the African Americans because it did not help the whites in a direct manner and it would also impose a “cost” on them; desegregation and voting rights for blacks was not highly prioritized on white Americas list of things to do during this era. However, this theory doesn’t explain the cases where an individual has a morality based on equality rather than race or education; in which case the individual, despite their race, believes that programs should be developed to assist with as many persons as possible (Aberson and Haag 2003; Federico and Sidanius 2002).

Similar to the previously mentioned theory, Self-Interest suggests that every person who is of a particular race (i.e. blacks) will be supportive of affirmative action programs because these programs benefit the individual as well as the group that the individual comes from. Based on these theoretical explanations of the relationships here brought forth, my hypotheses will provide additional knowledge which will assist in solidifying their propositions. The first is that Race will have an effect on attitudes about affirmative action. Additionally, the second explains how the control variable will affect the zero order relationship. That is that the higher educated white respondents will be more favorable than whites with lesser education with respect to attitudes about affirmative action and also that black respondents with higher levels of education will be more favorable than equally educated whites with respect to attitudes about affirmative action. The way in which education impacts the original relationship can be described as
specified because education changes the relationship between the dependent and independent variable for one race and not the other.

**Methods**

This study will use the General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS has been in existence since 1972 in the Social Science Research Center at the University of Chicago and is a part of the National Data Program for Social Sciences. Its primary goals are to conduct social research through surveying as well as distributing this information to scholars aiming to discover reliable information from survey sampling of United States citizens. The sample was conducted of English and Spanish speaking persons age eighteen and older. The data collected by the GSS was obtained through interviews given to national samples using a standard questionnaire. This questionnaire has remained relatively constant. Therefore, the GSS has been the primary survey used as a source of data collection because of its continuous tracking of social change in America.

**Data**

Although the GSS of 2006 provided 4510 cases, I will use a subsample of 1,660 cases; omitting 2,850 cases. The reason for this is due to the specificity of my research which analyses the responses of individuals who adhere to the requirements of the variables. This analysis will utilize the responses of black and white persons because this subsample (ethnicities) strongly affects the dependent variable. Of these respondents, there was another limiting factor. That is they must also have responded to the variables that measure educational attainment and attitude toward affirmative action. In addition, the reduction is directly related to the number of respondents who provided a valid answer. Of those invalid cases classifications were not applicable/available (no answer to this question) or the respondent did not know. It must
additionally be noted that omission of so many cases has not created the assumption of a
selection bias and that the selected cases are in fact proper representation of the original sample.
To be certain, both blacks and whites with different levels of education and varying attitudes
towards affirmative action are the focus of this research.

Measures

Variables, in their own right, cannot provide for any reasonable conclusions or
hypotheses about qualitative analyses. These variables must be measured and tested. Using the
GSS as a codebook and use of statistical software, I was able to extract my measures and
compute the data.

Foremost, the dependent variable race will be measured. The measure for race is
presented by the respondent’s depiction of what race they consider themselves to be. In this case
black, white, and other. This analysis will evaluate respondents who labeled themselves white or
black and any other entries will be omitted for simplicity.

The variable regarding attitudes about affirmative action will be measured by the
respondent’s beliefs in preferential hiring and promotion of blacks. This is the single most
accurate variable for the analysis of affirmative action because it is both concise and
encompassing. It measures the individual’s attitude by depicting whether they strongly support,
support, oppose or strongly oppose such policies. These responses were condensed further
through recoding to either support or oppose. The purpose of this and for the omission of all
other entries was for ease without the loss of measurable data.

Education is another important measure used to describe these relationships. The
measure for educational level will include respondents who classified themselves as obtaining
different levels of education. Recoding produced a measure that offered the responses as high
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school or less, some college, and graduate. With these three values this control measure was used to further determine the impact of education on the relationship between attitudes about affirmative action and race.

**Results**

To determine the significance of each variable to this research and its hypotheses, cross-tabulations were created and are represented by the following three tables:

**Table 1: Racial Attitudes toward Affirmative Action (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude Toward AA</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Oppose</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RS Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>88.6%</td>
<td>84.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
<td>57.2%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>1388</td>
<td>1660</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Educational Attitudes toward Affirmative Action (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude Toward AA</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Oppose</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RS Level of Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School or Less</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>84.6%</td>
<td>62.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>85.0%</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>72.7%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>1388</td>
<td>1660</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3: Racial Attitudes toward Affirmative Action by Education (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude Toward AA</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Oppose</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RS Level of Education</td>
<td>RS Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School or Less</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>90.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
<td>60.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>874</td>
<td>1033.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>89.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>48.2%</td>
<td>51.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
<td>76.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Count</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>1388</td>
<td>1660</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first table includes data about attitudes toward affirmative action broken down for race (black/white). It shows that 11.4% of whites in this subsample of 1,660 support affirmative action while 88.6% oppose. Also, it illustrates that 42.8% of blacks support affirmative action whilst 57.2% oppose it. Furthermore, the cross-tabulation makes visible that of the total subsample 84.1% were white and 15.9% were black.

The second table provides a visual of the attitudes toward affirmative action in relation to respondent’s level of education. Of the respondents with high school or less education 15.4% support affirmative action and the remaining 84.6% oppose it. Likewise, for persons with some college 15.0% have supportive attitudes towards affirmative action and 85% oppose it. For respondents who have graduate level education 27.3% support whereas 72.7% oppose affirmative action. Moreover, it shows the percent of the subsample at different levels of educational attainment: high school or less education (62.2%), some college (28.5%), and graduate (9.3%).

The final table provides an in depth view of the relationships between the independent variable (race) and the dependent variable (attitude toward affirmative action) while respecting the control variable (education). It depicts the percentages of whites and blacks and their attitude towards affirmative action broken down by educational attainment as well as the percent of each black and white that compose each level of education. The table contributes to the main findings of this research. That is that 9.7% of whites with high school or less education support while 39.8% of blacks with the same education support affirmative action. Also, of the respondents with some college, 10.6% of whites and 48.2% of blacks support affirmative action. In addition, for graduates 23.9% of whites and 66.7% of blacks support affirmative action. Due to the data located in these result, indicators of variable relationships are visible.
Discussion

The relationship between race and attitudes about affirmative action, as noted in Table 1, are significant. They provide a solid base in which to compare the first hypothesis of this research. That is that race affects the attitudes towards affirmative action in either supporting or opposing such policies. With one degree of freedom the Pierson calculated chi-square value is 159.91 demonstrating that the difference of percents between race and attitude towards affirmative action is significant at 0.000. This level of significance supports the initial hypothesis and provides that, among those who were surveyed, blacks are 42.8 percentage points more supportive of affirmative action.

Table 2 which, as previously noted accounts for the relationship between the respondent’s level of education and their attitudes towards affirmative action, provides substantial information in determining that a significant relationship is present. With two degrees of freedom the Pierson calculated chi-square value is 14.72. This indicates that the difference of percents between respondents’ level of education and attitude towards affirmative action is significant at 0.001. Though this is a note worthy discovery in understanding the relationship between these variables, it must be known that this research aims not at analyzing this relationship, but instead to determine educations impact on the relationship between race and attitudes towards affirmative action.

The third table provides sustentative data on the validity of the second two hypotheses. These findings strongly support the hypotheses in that higher educated white respondents are more supportive than whites with lesser education. The difference here between graduate and high school or less is about 14.2 percentage points. These findings also strongly support the hypothesis that black respondents with higher levels of education will be more favorable than
equally educated whites with respect to attitudes towards affirmative action. Likewise, the difference between equally educated whites and blacks computes to 42.8 percentage points. It shows that there is significance between race and attitudes towards affirmative action when viewed across levels of education. A Pierson calculated chi-square test of respondents with high school or less, some college, and graduate education shows that with one degree of freedom the value is 110.62, 54.89, and 10.182 respectively. Furthermore, it shows that the difference of percents between races with high school or less education and attitude toward affirmative action is significant at 0.000; the difference of percents between races with some college and attitudes towards affirmative action is significant at 0.000; and finally the difference of percents between races with graduate level education and attitudes towards affirmative action is significant at 0.001.

**Conclusion**

In summation, the results of this study and analysis support prior works performed in this area. Race and education has affects attitudes towards affirmative action and group/self interest theories supply much of the knowledge in understanding the basis for this relationship. Additionally, it addresses how controversial affirmative action policies are viewed by individuals of a particular race or education. Affirmative action policies have an impact in many people’s lives, especially within the economic and social sphere of employment and education. Furthermore, it made interesting discoveries in the importance of education and race on the impact of attitudes towards affirmative action. Though this study was based on the findings of previous research, errors in computation are feasible and/or realistic and therefore I would support additional studies in this area of study.
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