

Perspective on affirmative action assignment

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Perspectives on Affirmative Action Affirmative action is an issue that has been hotly contended in America since the days of the Reagan administration. An issue that is sensitive and uncomfortable to many Americans because of how intimately it deals with race, poverty and inequality. This essay will use Ira Katznelson's book *When Affirmative Action Was White* as a vehicle to closely examine affirmative action and several different perspectives will be offered.

Katznelson's point will be summarized and the views of Ronald Reagan, Sonia Sotomayor, Barack Obama and myself will be presented. First, I will make my case for why I feel Katznelson made a strong argument for affirmative action. Then I will present my perceived responses of Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama and Sonia Sotomayor to Katznelson's argument as well as their views on the issue. Lastly I will share my own response to the book as well as my personal views on affirmative action. Ira Katznelson makes a very compelling case for affirmative action in *When Affirmative Action Was White*.

In his closing statements Katznelson calls for affirmative action to be extended so that it ends in one generation, so that we can move toward a "fully-integrated, color-blind society" (p 172). Katznelson argues that we need affirmative now because so many past policies were advantageous to White Americans. With slavery, Jim Crow laws and discrimination African Americans have been kept out of academia for much of our country's history. African Americans weren't even allowed to vote until the ratification of the 15th amendment in 1870.

And even then Jim Crow laws, unfair testing, and intimidation kept them from the voting booths. Katznelson's position is that affirmative action has been "White" for most of this country's past. Roosevelt's New Deal, which created many social and government programs during the Great Depression, helped many Americans, most of them White. "Affirmative action was then White. New national policies enacted in the pre-civil rights, last gasp era of Jim Crow constituted a massive transfer of quite specific privileges to White Americans" (p 23).

Civil rights clauses could not be built into these programs in order for southern Democrats to pass them. Once put into action the programs often benefitted only, or disproportionately, White families. It is for these reasons that Katznelson argues we need affirmative action to level the playing field. Realizing that many African Americans have had to overcome serious obstacles not faced by Whites, and something must be done to change that.

An idea that many modern Conservatives say impedes on the rights of majority citizens. Many modern Conservatives are opposed to the idea of affirmative action policy. Believing that it intrudes on citizens' rights to pursue success (class notes). This paper will focus on past president Ronald Reagan. Reagan believed that affirmative action amounted to reverse discrimination by granting minority groups special privileges that were denied to the majority of Americans (Encarta Encyclopedia).

He also thought that these programs had been reduced to quota systems "I'm old enough to remember when quotas existed in the U. S. for the purpose of discrimination, and I don't want to see that happen again" (Time 1985).

Ronald Reagan was president of the United States from 1981 to 1989, and opposed “ overgrown government bureaucracy, expensive social programs and federal regulatory agencies that interfered in the private lives and business dealings of U. S. citizens” (Encarta).

In 1981 Reagan changed the policy that had required businesses working with the government to have affirmative action programs, no longer requiring them to do so. He also cut back on efforts to enforce equal opportunity laws. Reagan would not agree with Katznelson that affirmative action should be extended (p 172), or even exist at all. “ The 1980 election of President Ronald Reagan presented the possibility of significant changes in national civil rights policy.

The Republican platform criticized ‘ bureaucratic regulations which rely on quotas ratios, and numerical requirements to exclude some individuals in favor of others’ During the campaign, the Republican candidate declared: ‘ We must not allow the noble concept of equal opportunity to be distorted into federal guidelines or quotas which require race, ethnicity, or sex ??? rather than ability and qualifications ??? to be the principal factor in hiring or education’” (Equality Transformed: A Quarter-Century of Affirmative Action by Herman Belz)

Like Katznelson, Reagan seems to recognize the importance of equal opportunity and does not condone discrimination. But in Reagan’s contrasting view affirmative action is never equal, and denies certain Americans rights. He does not consider what many see as the overwhelming obstacles faced by some-like judge Sonia Sotomayor – as grounds for

affirmative action. Judge Sonia Sotomayor didn't speak English fluently until after the death of her father ??? who spoke only Spanish- at age nine.

Born in the Bronx to Puerto Rican parents, who eventually graduated from Princeton University summa cum laude (New York Times July 10, 2009) and is a self-proclaimed affirmative action success story. Sotomayor asserts that she was accepted at Princeton University and Yale Law because of her impoverished childhood and Hispanic background (NYT July 10, 2009)- that “if we had gone through the traditional numbers routines of these institutions, it would have been highly questionable if I would have been accepted” (PLI video 1994).

Sotomayor spoke extensively about affirmative action in a 1994 video by the Practicing Law Institute, Facing the 90's as a Woman Lawyer in Corporate and Litigation Practices. Of which an exceptionally enlightening excerpt is below. “With my academic achievement in high school I was accepted rather readily at Princeton and equally as fast at Yale, but my test scores were not comparable to that of my classmates. And that's been shown by statistics, there are reasons for that- there are cultural biases built into testing.

That was one of the motivations for the concept of affirmative action to try to balance out those effects” Even though her test scores may have been lower than her classmates, Sotomayor graduated summa cum laude from Princeton. Which is truly a testament to her intelligence and work ethic. Sotomayor also headed several Latin American and Hispanic student organizations during her academic career. Another argument for affirmative

action is that it makes for a well-rounded, multi faceted student body. A point not really made by Katznelson in When Affirmative Action Was White.

Ultimately Sotomayor would agree with Katznelson that affirmative action is necessary to level the playing field and allow deserving minorities to attend college. Also, Judge Sotomayor is living proof of Katznelson's assertion that affirmative action could end in one generation. As surely if Sotomayor were to have children they would be raised in a household where education is valued and would be well provided for. President Barack Obama echoes Ira Katznelson's call to extend affirmative action in order to end it in one generation. If we have done what needs to be done to ensure that kids who are qualified to go to college can afford it" says Obama in an interview with ABC's George Stephanopoulos, then " affirmative action becomes a diminishing tool for us to achieve racial equality in this society". The difference is where Katznelson calls for affirmative action to help move us towards " a fully integrated, color-blind society" While Katznelson presents affirmative action policy as one way of equalizing years of policy that was oppressive and humiliating to American minorities -namely Jim Crow laws- Obama focuses on socio-economic class.

His own daughters, he says, should be considered privileged by admissions officers. Also that White kids who have grown up in poverty and shown that they have what it takes should be taken into account (Stephanopoulos Interview May 13, 2007). Obama does recognize though, that race and poverty are often intertwined. " I do not think these concepts are mutually exclusive," says Obama about race and poverty " I think that what we can

say is in our society, race and class still intersect. That there are a lot of African American kids who are still struggling.

That even those who are middle class may be 1st generation as opposed to 5th or 6th generation college attendees, and that we all have an interest in bringing as many people together to help build this country” The reason that many African American students may be 1st generation college students ties into what Katznelson says about the discrimination of past policy. Unfair advantages given to white people in the past allowed them greater success than their black peers. Civil rights was often left out of New Deal policy to appease southern Democrats and help it pass through congress (p 29, p 21).

Not allowing Black Americans equal access to resources made it extremely difficult, if not impossible to get ahead. The average Black family had a net worth of \$8, 000 compared to the \$81, 000 net worth of the average White family at the end of the 20th century. That’s ten cents to the dollar (p 164). This means that many Blacks still have not caught up and cannot provide -as well as many white families- the tools or tuition for education. Making it less likely that a Black American will come from a formally educated family.

Obama would agree with Katznelson that poverty and race are still knotted together in contemporary American society, caused by past civil right violations, discrimination and apathy. Additionally Obama doesn’t believe that the policy should be based on race or reparative, but be based on socio-economic status. Both men think that if done properly, affirmative action can end within this generation. Affirmative action at the time of employment and

college entrance is action too late. These policies, designed to “ level the playing field” allow people to live and learn in unequal conditions.

There is a great disparity in the literacy levels of Whites in comparison to Blacks and Hispanics. On average White subjects scored 49 points higher than Black respondents on prose proficiency tests. Also Black scores were 21 points higher than those of Hispanic subjects (U. S. Department of Education). There is already inequality in the literacy abilities of different racial and ethnic groups, affirmative action allows these inequalities to continue to exist, acting as a small bandage for a deep, old, infected wound. Literacy is linked to income, which is linked to race (8. 9% of Whites, 24. 7% of Blacks, 23. 2% of Hispanics and 11. % of Asians lived in poverty in 2008 according to the Institute for Research on Poverty). High income is correlated to high literacy proficiency. 49% of adults that perform in level 1 in the prose scale (the lowest of 5) are impoverished, compared to 12% of those at level 3. Of course there are two sides to this statistic; low income as an outcome of poor literacy, and income as a factor that fosters or impedes academic achievement. The latter is more significant when speaking about youth. For many children poverty, and all the baggage that tends to come with it, is a serious hindrance to a quality education. Such sources point out that poor children are handicapped for school because their parents cannot afford to buy books, writing materials, computers, and other supports for education normally present in middle-class or affluent homes. In addition, poor students are distracted by chronic pain and disease, tend to live in communities that are afflicted by physical decay, serious crime, gangs, and drug problems, and face problems in their personal lives because there

families move frequently and their parents or older siblings have now left home, died, been incarcerated, or lead seriously disturbed lives.

Poor parents also cannot afford to buy stylish clothing for their children (needed if those children are to compete with others for status), let alone textbooks and schoolroom supplies, and those parents are more likely to work at jobs with rigid schedules which means that they are rarely able to meet with teachers or attend PTA meetings” (Bruce J Briddle) This is inherently unfair; no child deserves an education that is less than quality, where they do not have access to the same tools and resources as students in different socio-economic climates. There needs to be education and social reform.

Grassroots efforts must be made -in local schools and through community outreach- to level the playing field before competing for positions in the workforce and higher education. It is possible though to initiate social change through affirmative action. Katznelson proposes extending affirmative action in order to end it in one generation an idea that I believe could have an impact on many lives. The connection has already been made in the above paragraphs between income and education, and the disadvantages faced by children from lower class families.

Affirmative action allows students the opportunity to attend college which in turn is an opportunity to make more money – 70% more per year on average (The National Council on Economic Education)- than if they had only a high school diploma. Meaning that generation will be able to better provide their children with the tools to be successful students. The question is where to

start, is it better to give children the resources and opportunities to be competitive on their own?

Or use affirmative action in the hope that the next generation will have the means to compete. Of course the former would be more time consuming and expensive, but that is time and money I believe would be well spent.

Affirmative action isn't enough and it is the easy way out. Educational reform can give students the tools to be lifelong learners; it will give them the knowledge and skill to compete for top honors alongside their financially advantaged peers, making positions more competitive so the most qualified, not most advantaged, gets the position.

These students will pass on more than just money for books and clothes to the next generation, they will pass on knowledge and a hard work ethic and an understanding of what it takes to be successful. The question that still remains in the affirmative action debate seems to be “ can we take away someone's liberty to give someone else equality? ” I believe that it doesn't need to be like that and equality can be achieved not by dragging the top down, but by bringing the bottom up, through educational reform.

The Katznelson book reaffirmed my views about the inequality of education, but did not necessarily change my idea of how we should go about fixing it. I think the most compelling argument for affirmative action came from Sonia Sotomayor's personal story of how affirmative action helped her be there today. Sotomayor acknowledges the help she received and embraces it but she also recognizes the importance of growing up with a positive role model; where she was encouraged to succeed and most importantly, loved,

something that every child deserves. I stand on the shoulders of countless people, yet there is one extraordinary person who is my life aspiration – that person is my mother, Celina Sotomayor. ” Citations 1. U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Adult Literacy and Education in America: Four Studies Based on the National Adult Literacy Survey, NCES 1999-469, by Carl F. Kaestle, Anne Campbell, Jeremy D. Finn, Sylvia T. Johnson, and Larry H. Mikulecky. Project Officer: Andrew Kolstad.

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