

Ideas

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION
AND THE
AMERICAN CREED

Despite the great civil-rights triumphs of the 1960s, the politics of race once again occupies center stage in American life. Yet what appears to be a conflict between blacks and whites, Seymour Martin Lipset argues, is more a struggle between the American public and the nation's political elite over the true meaning of equality.

by Seymour Martin Lipset

No achievement of 20th-century American politics surpasses the creation of an enduring national consensus on civil rights. This consensus was forged during the past quarter century by a civil-rights movement that compelled Americans finally to confront the wide gap between their treatment of blacks and the egalitarian values of their own cherished national creed.

In recent years, however, the leaders of the civil-rights movement have shifted the focus from the pursuit of equal opportunity to the pursuit of substantive equality through policies of preferential treatment. This has brought matters to a difficult pass, because most Americans, including many blacks, have not shifted with the leaders of the movement. The reason is not hard to find. While the civil-rights movement of the 1960s asked Americans to live up to a single unassailable ideal, today it sets up a conflict between two core American values: egalitarianism and individualism.

Affirmative action was born in 1965 in the spirit of the first civil-rights revolution. Soon thereafter it was transformed into a system of racial preferences, and today affirmative action is rapidly polarizing the politics of race in America. The editorial and op-ed pages bristle with affirmative action polemics and analyses. In the 1990 contest for the governorship of California, Republican Pete Wilson focused on the "quota" issue in defeating Diane Feinstein. In the same year, Senator Jesse Helms won reelection in North Carolina with the help of the quota issue, and in Louisiana ex-Klansman David Duke exploited it to gain a majority of white votes while losing his bid for a Senate seat. His failed campaign for the governorship last fall became a national drama. When Congress began its 1991 session, the first bill introduced by the Democratic leadership in the House of Representatives was a civil-rights bill described by its opponents as "quota" legislation. Even after a version of that bill became law in November, controversy over its meaning and import continued.

Ugly political campaigns and even uglier racial incidents everywhere from Bensonhurst to Los Angeles sometimes make it appear that there has been a resurgence of racism in America. But the old consensus in favor of civil rights and equality of opportunity remains intact. Americans, including many southern whites, categorically reject the kind of racial discrimination that was common in this country only a few decades ago. A 1991 Gallup-*Newsweek* poll reported that "72 percent of blacks and 52 percent of whites said that they would prefer to live in a neighborhood that was racially 'half and half'—more on both sides than felt that way three years ago." Over two-thirds of whites and four-fifths of blacks claim to "know many members of another race well." Almost no whites (six percent) report that they would feel "uncomfortable working with members of another race" or "for a boss of another race."

At the same time, most Americans endorse some forms of compensatory action to help blacks and other disadvantaged groups perform at the levels of competition set by the larger society: Head Start and other special educational programs, federal aid for college students, job training, and community development. But a large majority of whites and roughly half of all blacks draw the line at preferential treatment, at suspending standards and adopting quotas or other devices that favor citizens on the basis of their membership in groups.

If most Americans oppose such preferential treatment, who backs it? As it turns out, the support comes largely from a segment of the national leadership class. Indeed, the policy was conceived and is still promoted almost entirely by political and social elites, Republicans as well as Democrats, against the wishes of a majority of the American public. The struggle over preferential treatment is in reality less a conflict between whites and blacks than between people and their leaders.

More than 150 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that the American version of egalitarianism emphasized equality of opportunity and of respect, rather than equality of result or condition. This version of equality is one of five related elements in the American Creed, including liberty, individualism, populism (the rule of the people), and laissez faire. In the Europe of Tocqueville's day, with its heritage of feudalism, societies were structured in strict social classes. The emerging working class of 19th-century Europe therefore viewed the class system as immutable and sought equality of results



Corporate Ladder
by
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