

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION OR SEGREGATION: WHO BENEFITS?

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There is considerable evidence that Americans are turning against affirmative action even while continuing to believe in democracy and fair play. A majority of whites are against affirmative action but most Black people are for it. Why? What can we do to get back on track?

Affirmative action is based on the 14th Amendment to the Constitution. Passed in 1868, the 14th Amendment aimed at extending citizenship rights to the former slaves and guaranteeing them "equal protection of the laws." In 1896, the Supreme Court used the Amendment to justify segregation in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Half a century later in the 1954 *Brown v. Board* ruling, the Supreme Court reversed itself and used the same amendment to support integration. Today, anti-affirmative action proposals like Proposition 209 in California and segregationist rulings such as in the *Hopwood* case in Texas use this same 14th Amendment.

Economic change helps explain this pendulum swing. The 1896 *Plessy* decision came when cotton production ruled the lives of Black and white sharecropping tenant farmers. Keeping Blacks and whites apart prevented them from standing together and challenging exploitation by landowners. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling, that separate was equal below the Mason Dixon line, helped keep Southern labor divided and uneducated.

The 1954 *Brown* decision came after the mechanization of Southern agriculture ended sharecropping as a labor system. Forced off the land, Black people migrated to the industrialized cities. Factory work required more literacy. The court ruled that separate was inherently not equal,

and education of Blacks and whites proceeded to improve and expand.

As the economy continued to grow and the Black liberation movement pressed forward, new affirmative action policies in higher education began to guarantee Black people a share of seats in each entering class. This allowed each college to recruit a diverse student body and graduate a diverse pool of professionals to work in public and private sectors at both the community and the national level.

Now things have changed and today we see "equal protection of the laws" serving segregation. The Hopwood ruling in Texas argued that giving Blacks preferential treatment in admissions was reverse discrimination and violated the 14th Amendment. Going a step further in California, anti-affirmative action forces (led by a Black member of the Board of Regents) initiated and got the voters to pass Proposition 209, which outlaws affirmative action as a state policy.

What is the economics behind this pendulum swing? High tech professional level jobs are in demand, but most new jobs are temporary, part time, seasonal, and/or minimum wage. Yet higher education is still geared toward an expanding job market. The result is an effort to downsize education to match the downsized corporation: tuition increases, expanded use of mandatory but biased standardized tests, a rejection of open enrollment and bilingual education, and an overall decline in institutions of higher education.

If Blacks stop getting a share of the seats, will economic security and opportunities for higher education continue to expand? No. So when whites turn against affirmative action, they are agreeing to be divided and uneducated. When one percent of the population owns more wealth than the bottom 90 percent, it should be clear that what everyone needs is more jobs and more education.

Our society is corrupted by centuries of racist oppression against people of color, especially including slavery of the African Americans. The reason to defend affirmative action is to prevent racism from once again blinding us to our collective interest in justice and economic security for all.