

America's Verdict on Affirmative Action is Decidedly Mixed

By Jim Norman

In early February of this year, editors and pollsters across the country came to the same conclusion: "Affirmative action is hot news, and we need to poll on it!" The result: everywhere news junkies turned for the next month, they were hit with a story of "America's ambivalent feelings toward affirmative action." In all, six polls serving ten media organizations covered the subject in less than a month.

We at *USA Today* were even more intrigued by the subject than most. The paper's editors were committed to covering affirmative action in depth throughout 1995, and they sought to use a survey to kick off their coverage. With that in mind, we worked with CNN and the Gallup Organization to go several steps beyond the usual 15-question overview of a topic. We drew up a package of more than 40 questions so that we could look at more than one dimension of the issue. We oversampled for blacks to give us more flexibility in determining their attitudes. Finally, David Moore at the Gallup Organization developed a four-fold typology to examine how Americans group on the affirmative action issue. (The survey was conducted March 17-19, 1995).

What did we find out? In sum, that there is no simple answer to whether or not Americans support affirmative action; that white men might not be seeing reverse discrimination at every turn; that white women are a classic "swing-voter" group; that the political implications are many; and that there are still as many questions as answers.

Be Careful With Terminology

Forget whether people say they are for or against "affirmative action programs." Though it's been the founda-

tion for polling on the issue over the past two decades, the question reveals little, if anything. Our polling showed that respondents clearly have widely differing definitions of the subject, so that someone who claims to oppose "affirmative action programs" may actually support many more types of programs than someone identified as an affirmative action supporter.

Consider this: even among survey respondents who said they supported "affirmative action programs," 56% opposed setting aside scholarships for minorities and women, and 40% opposed

“*Our polling showed that respondents have widely differing definitions of the subject, so that someone who claims to oppose “affirmative action programs” may actually support many more types of programs than one identified as an affirmative action supporter.*”

favoring a minority over an equally-qualified white applicant. Among respondents who said that they were opposed to "affirmative action," 59% approved of companies making special efforts to recruit qualified minorities or women, 68% favored special job training programs, and 58% favored special educational classes for minorities and women.

A more meaningful way to look at the issue is to find out which specific aspects of affirmative action have consensus agreement, which ones are divid-

ing Americans, and what the divisions are. In examining our findings this way, we found a three-way split on the main issues in the poll.

Concepts Which Unite Americans

There seems to be widespread support across racial and gender lines for programs which give women and minorities a boost without explicitly harming white males. For example, 73% of Americans approve of companies making special efforts to find and recruit qualified minorities and women—including 69% of white males and 69% of conservatives. Further, 82% of the public approve of job training programs to help make minorities and women better qualified, with high levels of support across racial, gender and political lines. Finally, 75% approve of special educational classes, with almost no drop-off of support among whites, men, conservatives or Republicans.

On the other end of the affirmative action spectrum, there's consensus opposition among all Americans to giving a minority applicant a job instead of a better-qualified white, even if the workplace has few minority workers. Only 13% of women and 22% of blacks endorse the idea.

Issues That Divide Americans Along Racial & Gender Lines

Americans are split along racial and gender lines on the issue of government set-asides—requiring a certain percentage of government contracts to be awarded to businesses owned by minorities and women. Seventy-three percent of blacks approve; white women are split on the issue, with 50% supporting and 45% opposing; and 60% of white men are opposed.

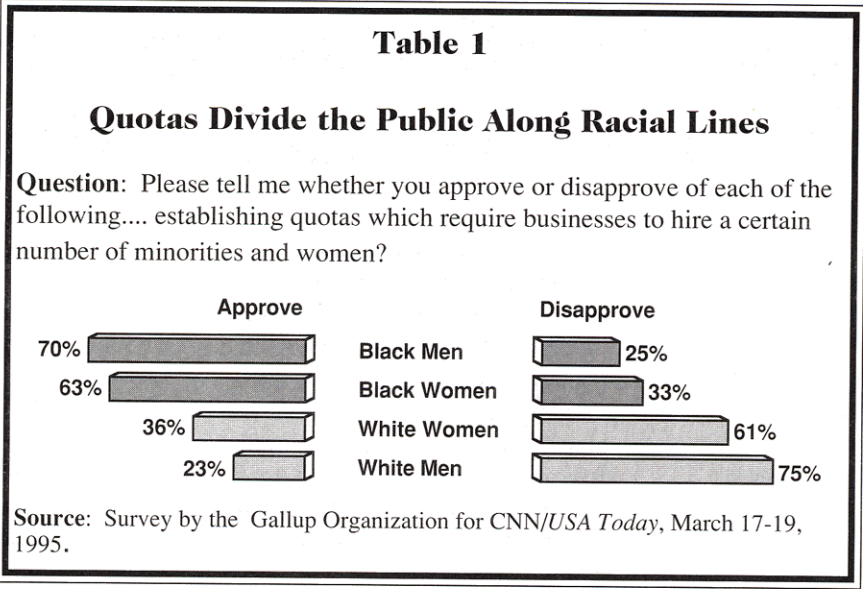
Making available a certain number of college scholarships only to minorities and women draws strong opposition (67%) overall. But this masks a split among blacks, with 51% supporting the idea and 45% opposing it. Over 70% of whites, both men and women, disapprove.

The visceral issue of quotas, whether for college admissions or hirings in the workplace, produced some of the widest gaps in our poll between blacks and whites, with smaller differences between men and women. Table 1 offers a breakdown by both gender and race on the issue of job quotas.

An Issue That Divides Both Blacks and Whites

What to do when you have two equally qualified applicants, one white and one a minority, in a workplace that has few minority workers? Americans, both black and white, are split on whether to favor the minority. Blacks, by a slight 51% to 42% majority, think the minority applicant should be picked. Among whites, 47% approve of favoring the minority applicant, 45% do not.

A Princeton Survey Research Associates poll conducted for *Newsweek* March 23-24, 1995 found out what people really think should be done in this case. Their question: "Suppose in recent years a high school increased its percentage of black teachers through affirmative action. Now, for economic reasons, it must lay off one of two teachers who are equally qualified. One is black, one is white. If you were making the decision, would you lay off the black teacher, lay off the white teacher, or flip a coin?" Flip the coin, said 73% of the respondents.



How Angry Are Those White Males?

We are not a nation of white men seething because they've been done wrong by affirmative action. Most say they've neither lost a job or promotion nor seen a black or woman get an undeserved promotion because of affirmative action. Further, white men are more likely to consider job discrimination a major problem for black men, black women and Hispanics than they are to consider it a major problem for themselves.

Which is not to say white men are big supporters of affirmative action. They are not. And it is not to say that there aren't a lot of white men who say they've witnessed reverse discrimination. There are. But most white-male opponents seem to be basing their opinion on something other than personal experiences.

Less than one-third of white men say they've been personally affected by reverse discrimination. Twenty-three percent believe they have lost a job or promotion because of affirmative action; 30% believe they have seen a minority get an undeserved job where they work because of affirmative action (34% of white women say they've witnessed similar results); and 21% believe

they have seen a woman get an undeserved job where they work because of affirmative action.

On the other side, there are a lot of people who say they've either witnessed or personally been a victim of discrimination, and many more who believe they've seen affirmative action succeed in their workplace. Fifty-one percent of black men, 49% of black women

and 23% of white women feel that discrimination has cost them a job, promotion or admittance to a college or university. Further, 36% of blacks, 28% of white women and 14% of white men have felt at some point that, because of discrimination, a person where they worked did not get a job for which they were qualified.

The Pivotal Role Of White Women

Many supporters of affirmative action have identified white women as the key to protecting programs from Republican assaults. The supporters contend that, though white males cannot be budged from their opposition to most forms of affirmative action, white women can be brought into the fold by emphasizing how programs help women and de-emphasizing how they help minorities.

“White women are the swing group in the debate over whether to keep affirmative action programs; they are easily the most ambivalent of all demographic groups.”

Our polling seems to indicate that this analysis is both right and wrong. When affirmative action programs are defined as ones that help women, they routinely gain ten or more percentage points over the level of support reached when they are described as helping minorities. In a split-sample experiment, we asked half the respondents if they approved of affirmative action programs for minorities — 40% approved. The other half of our respondents were asked if they approved of affirmative action programs for women — 50% did.

But support did not just rise among white women; white men also were more likely to support affirmative action for women than affirmative action for minorities (a finding mirrored in a *Los Angeles Times* poll conducted over the same weekend).

White women are clearly a swing group in the debate over whether to keep affirmative action programs; they are easily the most ambivalent of all demographic groups. For example, 54% of white women favor requiring businesses to set up goals and timetables for the employment of women and minorities, 40% are opposed; 50% favor making some government contracts available only to women or minority-owned businesses, 45% are opposed; 45% approve of favoring a qualified minority over an equally qualified white, 47% are opposed. Finally, 40% favor quotas requiring schools to admit a certain number of minorities and women, 55% are opposed.

And on the basic question of whether affirmative action programs in this country should be increased, decreased or kept the same, white women split almost

evenly three ways: 29% want increases, 29% want the status quo, 35% want decreases.

Grouping the Public on Affirmative Action

A cluster analysis, which uses the results from several related survey items to organize respondents into generalized categories, was performed by David Moore at Gallup. This analysis allowed us to look beyond basic crosstabs to see the dynamics of how Americans group on the issues.

Two of the four groups identified were exceedingly predictable:

—The group labeled “True Believers” (28% of the sample) were the fervent supporters of affirmative

action, with a majority believing all programs should not just be kept at their current levels, but, in fact, increased. There was overwhelming support for all forms of affirmative action, including quotas. This group views racism, sexism and discrimination as major problems in our society today. “True Believers” are more likely to be Democrats, minorities and women.

—“Antagonists” (24% of the sample) don’t find much they like about the idea of affirmative action. Almost all are white, three-quarters are Republican and 57% are male. They don’t think discrimination is much of a problem these days and support the complete abolition of affirmative action programs. This is the only group that opposes the

Table 2
The Demographics of Affirmative Action Support and Opposition
[Column Percentages Read Down]

	“True Believers” (28%)	“Floaters” (21%)	“Dubious” (27%)	“Antagonist”s (24%)
Party				
Republican	29%	44%	49%	71%
Democrat	53	45	41	20
Race				
White	69	87	93	98
Black	25	8	5	2
Other	6	5	2	*
Gender				
Male	39	44	50	57
Female	61	56	50	43
Race/Gender				
White males	24	40	45	55
White females	45	47	45	43
Minority males	15	4	3	2
Minority females	18	9	4	*
Education				
Some college or more	43	34	64	57
Age				
50 years and older	29	49	31	41
Income				
Over \$50,000	19	23	35	35

Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for CNN/USA Today, March 17-19, 1995.

Politics of the Nineties — Jim Norman

most benign programs, such as job training or special job recruitment efforts.

Between these two groups at either end of the political spectrum, there are two other groups of more interest to politicians battling over the fate of affirmative action programs.

—“Floaters” (21% of the sample) tend to be older, much less educated and poorer than average. They support affirmative action programs in general—even though they don’t think the US has major problems with discrimination. Their support for affirmative action is wide and deep, including more controversial programs such as government set-asides and racial/gender quotas for admission to college.

—The Dubious,” (27% of the sample) evenly split by gender and political affiliation, are well-educated and affluent. This group draws clear distinctions on which affirmative action programs to support. They reject any program that seems to help minorities or women at the expense of white males (quotas, set-asides, preference to a minority over an equally-qualified white), but embrace programs that seem to give a helping hand to minorities and women without harming white males (special job recruitment efforts, special education and job training classes). They are divided on whether affirmative action is needed. A majority feel job dis-

crimination is a major problem for blacks and Hispanics, but a majority also believe that blacks have as good a chance as whites at getting a job in their communities.

Political Implications

With the Republicans in Congress

“*The results indicate that reforming affirmative action is not a high priority for most Americans.*”

criticizing affirmative action programs and President Clinton involved in a review of current procedures, the political battles are heating up across several fronts. Our poll attempted to measure some of the fallout.

Although some observers expect Clinton, sooner or later, to recommend cutbacks to affirmative action, our poll seemed to show that there is no political advantage in doing so. Twenty-six percent of Clinton voters say they would be less likely to vote for him if he supported cutbacks; only 19% say they would be more likely to vote for him. Twenty-two percent of Perot voters say they would be less likely, 10% say they would be more likely. No matter where they fall

on the political spectrum, Americans tend to say they would be less likely to vote for Clinton if he supports cutbacks.

Republican efforts in Congress to get rid of affirmative action programs were viewed by half of Americans as the result of a sincere belief that the programs have failed and by a third as an attempt to exploit the fears of white voters for political advantage.

Finally, a note of caution. An NBC/*Wall Street Journal* survey conducted March 4-7, 1995, proposed the following, “I’d like to read you a list of seven possible legislative priorities. Please tell me which one or two you feel are the most important issues for Congress to address.” The results indicate that reforming affirmative action is not a top priority for most Americans. Combining first and second responses, welfare reform was seen as most important (41%), followed by health care reform (40%), a balanced budget amendment (30%), increase in the minimum wage (20%), a middle class tax cut (19%), revising the crime bill (19%), and, in last place, cutting back affirmative action programs (7%).

Still, no matter where Americans put affirmative action on their priority list, it certainly will be a major political issue over the next year. The battle is almost certain to be a divisive one. The public is split (especially along racial lines) on many aspects, and large numbers on either side of the issue feel aggrieved.



*Jim Norman is polling editor,
USA Today*