

Singapore's Lessons on Affirmative Action Balancing Meritocracy and Diversity

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In early August, the New York Times reported that the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) would be looking into lawsuits filed by Asian Americans against Harvard University, alleging anti-Asian racial discrimination in the school's admissions policies. The move has set off fervent discussion in the United States over the future of affirmative action, or the practice, in place since the 1960s, of positive discrimination in favor of historically marginalized groups.

Yet the United States is not the only country trying to negotiate the delicate balance between upholding meritocracy and ensuring that racial minorities do not feel a sense of alienation. Singapore, a multiracial city-state that has assiduously avoided affirmative action policies, last year passed constitutional changes that pave the way for its first presidential election (on September 23) in which all candidates will come from the minority Malay ethnic group. The Singaporean government views any help it provides to ensure minority representation as a safeguard against instability. It is wary of implementing policies that affect a broad category of minorities, which may ultimately relegate them to be viewed as tokens.

THE AMERICAN WAY

In the United States, the DOJ's move has reignited long-running debates about affirmative action. Such policies have long been opposed by conservative white Americans, and many fear that President Donald Trump's administration is simply looking for any avenue it can find to bolster white privilege. Yet not all those who oppose affirmative action are white—some Asian Americans, often more recent immigrants, have also called for a purely meritocratic system of college admissions, since they need to obtain much higher test scores than students of other races to be admitted to highly selective colleges. Asian Americans, moreover, have often been presented by critics of affirmative action as so-called model minorities for having allegedly overcome discrimination through an emphasis on education and hard work.

American opponents of affirmative action argue that the United States is no longer the segregated country it was in the mid-1960s, when such policies began. Today the U.S. elite is much more diverse, and a black man, Barack Obama, served two terms as president. Allowing affirmative action to continue, they argue, simply perpetuates the existence of an underclass whose members require exemptions from normal standards and who are not fully accepted in prominent positions because they are viewed as tokens. Critics of affirmative action also see it as tantamount to reverse racism. Race-conscious policies, they claim, are biased against whites and high-achieving minorities. And in fact, one of the most under-represented groups on prestigious U.S. campuses is white, working-class Christians from conservative states.

Defenders of affirmative action generally counter that such measures should continue as long as racism and bigotry remain present in society—a charge that is hard to deny considering recent events in Charlottesville. It is unfair, they say, to expect minorities such as African Americans, who have faced a history of oppression (including slavery, segregation, and police brutality), to be measured according to the same metrics as other students. Some argue further that test scores alone are an incomplete measure of academic potential—they may reflect nothing more than hours of preparation with the help of tutors. And many fear that tampering with affirmative action can hurt minority representation. After California banned affirmative action in 1998, combined African American and Hispanic enrollment at the University of California, Berkeley, plunged from 22 percent to 13 percent of the school’s total.

The U.S. Supreme Court, in its 2016 ruling in *Fisher v. University of Texas*, defended the use of carefully thought-out affirmative action policies in pursuit of the broader goals of higher education, such as ensuring opportunities for minorities and giving students the benefit of learning in a racially and ethnically diverse environment. The latter consideration weighed heavily on the court’s decision in *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), in which a five-to-four majority affirmed the University of Michigan law school’s consideration of race as one among many factors in admissions. As Justice Sandra Day O’Connor noted in her opinion (quoting from a district court decision), a diverse campus promotes “cross-racial understanding,” helps to “break down racial stereotypes,” and enables students “to better understand persons of different races.” A 2016 review of empirical literature by the economists Peter Arcidiacono and Michael Lovenheim, however, found that the effects of affirmative action are inconclusive.

SINGAPORE'S MERITOCRACY

Affirmative action continues to inspire discomfort among many Americans. For instance, a 2016 Gallup poll found that 65 percent of Americans disapproved of the Court’s ruling in *Fisher*. Ultimately, affirmative action goes against the ideals of a meritocratic society, which holds that talent and not background should determine attainment. The need to balance this ideal with the quest for diversity in a multiracial society continues to present a difficult problem. Singapore—where about three-quarters of the population is ethnically Chinese, with Malays, Indians, and other minorities making up the remainder—provides an interesting comparison with the United States. Singapore is opposed to affirmative action for admissions into its competitive colleges, but has mechanisms in place to safeguard minority representation in the highest office of the land.

Singapore’s intensely meritocratic vision has long differentiated it from its northern neighbor, Malaysia, from which it separated in 1965. Whereas Malaysia has adopted policies to provide preferential treatment—ranging from university admissions to jobs in the civil service—for members of its ethnic Malay majority, the founders of modern Singapore were deeply committed to the principles of multiracialism. They sought to create a system in which all citizens are treated equally regardless of racial background, and opportunities are given to those who deserve them.

Meritocracy is a fundamental principle of governance in Singapore, but this does not equate to a race-blind approach to policymaking. In addition to allowing the talented to succeed, the Singaporean government accepts that it is responsible for the maintenance of a diverse society and designs policy to maintain peaceful coexistence between the country’s racial groups.

Harmonious relationships, the government believes, can only be forged if each community is willing to cede some of its rights and tolerate those of the others. No community, moreover, should be marginalized. Meritocracy is a fundamental principle of governance in Singapore, but this does not equate to a race-blind approach to policymaking.

As part of this responsibility, Singapore has sought to ensure representation of all races in different sectors of society. In higher education, which has long been associated with better job opportunities in the city-state, the government has had some success in increasing the proportion of minority groups who are able to be admitted to the university. (In Singapore, university admissions are highly competitive and primarily based on performance in examinations.) In 1980, among the cohort of Malays who had entered the first grade together, only 0.5 percent had been admitted to a publicly funded university. By 2005, that number had risen to 5.4 percent, and in 2015 reached 7.7 percent. By comparison, for Singapore Chinese the cohort participation rate in 2005 was 30 percent; for Indians, 11 percent.

This increase among Malays was the result not of affirmative action but of official efforts to build Malay students' capabilities starting in early childhood. In 1982, the government established ethnic self-help groups for Malays (known as MENDAKI) to look into resolving student underperformance. The agency has developed numerous strategies to improve educational attainment, including subsidizing tutoring services, establishing mentorship programs, and educating Malay parents on the value of academic achievement. The steady growth in Malay graduation rates suggests the partial success of these efforts. And Malay students in the universities are accepted as equals by their Chinese counterparts, who know they have qualified with similar scores on the national examinations.

Despite such progress, however, Malays still lag behind Chinese and Indians in terms of education. Partly as a result, 41 percent of Malays age 18–25 support preferential treatment for minorities, according to a nationally representative survey conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) in 2013, whereas only 24 percent of Chinese supported such policies. But the government has not shifted its position. Instead, it periodically highlights the achievements of the Malay community, while pointing out that these have been the result of talent and hard work rather than official preferences.

BALANCING ACT

Although the Singaporean government has hesitated to use affirmative action to improve minority representation at universities, it does not shy away from policies that may appear to buck its official ideology of meritocracy.

One such policy is the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) scheme, implemented in 1988, in which parties field a team of candidates to represent a constituency in parliament, at least one of whom must be an ethnic minority. One of the main purposes of the policy is to ensure that Singapore's minorities are always represented in parliament in proportion to their share of the population.

In 2016, Singapore made the latest addition to its suite of race-based policies by updating the law governing election to the country's presidency. (In Singapore's parliamentary system, the prime minister is the head of government while the president plays a largely custodial role that includes safeguarding the nation's financial reserves and approving appointments to key government posts, such as the attorney general.) Under the new modifications, the office of president must from time to time be held by members of each of Singapore's constituent races. If one of the races has not been represented after five election cycles, parliament can call for a restricted election, open only to candidates from the excluded group. The coming presidential election on September 23, for instance, will feature only Malay candidates.

The proximate cause of this change was the absence of any Malay president since the death of President Yusof Ishak in 1970. This led government leaders to become concerned that the issue could be politicized, thereby threatening Singapore's carefully managed ethnic harmony. Yet the restricted election solution has been challenged. In the public hearings on the subject, many questioned whether the restriction of presidential candidates by race would shift Singapore away from its race-neutral aspirations. Others, such as Gillian Koh (a colleague of the author at IPS), asked whether such restrictions might result in a president who was seen as an ethnic token who would lack the legitimacy to check the government. Singapore's leadership, however, has maintained that the use of a restricted election does not amount to affirmative action since it does not reduce the qualifications required for an individual to serve as president. All candidates, regardless of race, must have held very senior positions in the public or private sector in order to run for the office. This high bar will not be lowered, even if the group in question has few members who can clear it.

The main purpose of the restricted election will be to address potential biases among the population. Despite more than 50 years of official attempts to combat it, there is still some racism in Singapore. An IPS survey on race relations conducted last year in collaboration with the broadcaster Channel News Asia revealed that although Chinese respondents would unanimously accept a Singaporean Chinese as the country's president, only 59 percent of them would accept a Malay and 68 percent of them an Indian. The survey does not take into account many other considerations that might determine voter preferences, but it suggests that biases could unfairly penalize otherwise stellar minority candidates from being elected. This is especially so in the presidential election, in which candidates are expected to be non-partisan. Without a political platform, racial biases are even more likely to play a role in voting.

Singapore's approach to managing racial issues is certainly not perfect, and has its detractors both domestically and internationally who claim that the government's foray into issues of race further entrenches the persistence of racial stereotypes. But the city-state's example shows that by intervening in carefully designed ways, there is scope for a pluralistic country to fine-tune policies that ensure minority representation without compromising on the principle of meritocracy. At a time when the issue of race has emerged as one of the most threatening potential fault-lines in meritocratic societies, finding a balance between the two will likely become much more urgent.

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