

# Affirmative Action Has Helped White Women More Than Anyone

Their successes make the case not for abandoning affirmative action but for continuing it

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Mark Wilson / Getty Images

Abigail Fisher speaks to the media after the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments in her case in Washington, D.C., on Oct. 10

In the coming days, the U.S. Supreme Court is expected to rule in a potentially landmark case on the constitutionality of affirmative action. The original lawsuit was filed on behalf of Abigail Fisher, a woman who claims that she was denied admission to the University of Texas because she is white. But study after study shows that affirmative action helps white women as much or even more than it helps men and women of color. Ironically, Fisher is exactly the kind of person affirmative action helps the most in America today.

Originally, women weren't even included in legislation attempting to level the playing field in education and employment. The first affirmative-action measure in America was an executive order signed by President Kennedy in 1961 requiring that federal contractors "take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin." In 1967, President Johnson amended this, and a subsequent measure included sex, recognizing that women also faced many discriminatory barriers and hurdles to equal opportunity. Meanwhile, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 only included sex in the list of prohibited forms of discrimination because conservative opponents of the legislation hoped that including it would sway moderate members of Congress to withdraw their support for the bill. Still, in a nation where white women and black people were once considered property — not allowed to own property themselves and not allowed to vote — it was clear to all those who were seeking fairness and opportunity that both groups faced monumental obstacles.

While people of color, individually and as groups, have been helped by affirmative action in the subsequent years, data and studies suggest women — white women in particular — have benefited disproportionately. According to one study, in 1995, 6 million women, the majority of whom were white, had jobs they wouldn't have otherwise held but for affirmative action.

Another study shows that women made greater gains in employment at companies that do business with the federal government, which are therefore subject to federal affirmative-action requirements, than in other companies — with female employment rising 15.2% at federal contractors but only 2.2% elsewhere. And the women working for federal-contractor companies also held higher positions and were paid better.

Even in the private sector, the advancements of white women eclipse those of people of color. After IBM established its own affirmative-action program, the numbers of women in management positions more than tripled in less than 10 years. Data from subsequent years show that the number of executives of color at IBM also grew, but not nearly at the same rate.

The successes of white women make a case not for abandoning affirmative action but for continuing it. As the numbers in the Senate and the Fortune 500 show, women still face barriers to equal participation in leadership roles. Of course, the case for continuing affirmative action for people of color is even greater. The median wealth of white households is 20 times that of black households. Researchers found that the same résumé for the same job application will get twice as many callbacks for interviews if the name on the résumé is Greg instead of Jamal. School districts spend more on predominantly white schools than predominantly black schools. The fact that black workers earn, on average, 35% less than white workers in the same job isn't erased by the election of an African-American President — one who, by the way, openly praises the role of affirmative action in his life and accomplishments.

As for Fisher, there is ample evidence that she just wasn't qualified to get into the University of Texas. After all, her grades weren't that great, and the year she applied for the university, admissions there were actually more competitive than Harvard's. In its court filings, the university has pointed out that even if Fisher received a point for race, she still wouldn't have met the threshold for admissions. Yes, it is true that in the same year, the University of Texas made exceptions and admitted some students with lower grades and test scores than Fisher. Five of those students were black or Latino. Forty-two were white.