Searching for Common Ground between Supporters and Opponents of Affirmative Action

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Supporters and opponents of affirmative action are often characterized as debating about a single, consensually understood type of affirmative action. However, supporters and opponents instead may have different types of policies in mind when thinking about affirmative action and may actually agree on specific manifestations of affirmative action policies more than is commonly believed. A survey conducted using a student sample and a sample from the broader Chicago-area community showed that affirmative action policies can be characterized into merit-violating versus merit-upholding manifestations. Supporters of affirmative action in general were more likely to think of affirmative action in its merit-upholding manifestations, whereas opponents were more likely to think of the merit-violating manifestations. However, both supporters and opponents showed more support for merit-upholding rather than merit-violating manifestations of affirmative action. The same pattern of results was upheld even when splitting the samples into those who endorsed negative racial attitudes versus those who did not, suggesting that even those who may be considered racist will endorse affirmative action policies that uphold merit values. The results are discussed in terms of the importance of clarifying the political discourse about what affirmative action is and what it is designed to do.

KEY WORDS: Affirmative action, conservatism, racial policy, merit, deservingness, racial attitudes, stereotypes
In 1965, a bipartisan movement was launched at the highest levels of government to redress widespread discrimination against women and minorities in the workplace. The result of this effort, which ultimately was signed into law by President Richard Nixon, was Executive Order 11246: better known as the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, or more colloquially, Affirmative Action. At the time of the bill, it was widely recognized that racial and sexual biases were deeply entrenched in American society resulting in striking economic and educational disadvantages for women and minorities. Policy makers mobilized to create an immediate and dramatic reduction in these barriers through government intervention in the form of law.

Almost immediately, the Equal Employment Opportunity Act sparked controversy and has since become one of the most racially and politically divisive issues in the last forty years (Harris & Merida, 1995). At the time of its passing, there was little disagreement on the economic and opportunity disparities between different demographic groups in America; however, since affirmative action programs (AAPs) have been put into place, the debate over the need for such programs and the manner in which they are implemented has polarized the nation politically and ideologically.

Affirmative Action and Public Opinion

What exactly is “affirmative action”? Like many policy catch phrases, such as “welfare,” “tax cuts,” and “education,” the term “affirmative action” does not refer to any single policy nor does it adhere to any universally agreed upon definition (Crosby, 2004, p. 4; also see Henry, Reyna, & Weiner, 2004, for a similar discussion). When affirmative action is discussed or debated in political arenas or in the media, people refer to the policy in blanket terms, e.g., people talk about either supporting or opposing “affirmative action” in the abstract. Rarely do politicians, lawmakers, or reporters clearly delineate the varying applications and manifestations that define this policy.

Nevertheless, members of the general public have fierce opinions about affirmative action. Different people often have different policies and practices in mind when thinking about affirmative action, and these beliefs are not always realistic or accurate. Several studies show that the general public is not well informed about how affirmative action policy is legally defined or practically applied (Crosby & Cordova, 1996; Kravitz & Platania, 1993; Steeh & Krysan, 1996; Winkleman & Crosby, 1994).

The Framing of Affirmative Action and the Merit Principle

Because few people know the details of Executive Order 11246, people are left to formulate opinions about affirmative action around whichever framing they are exposed to most frequently, or which version of affirmative action best fits
with their ideological perspective. Those who oppose affirmative action claim that such policies undermine principles of fairness and equity that are cornerstones of democracy (Bobocel, Son Hing, Davey, Stanley, & Zanna, 1998; Carmines & Merriman, 1993; Kuklinski et al., 1997; Roth, 1994; Sniderman & Piazza, 1993; Sniderman & Tetlock, 1986; Sniderman, Carmines, Layman, & Carter, 1996; Sniderman, Crosby, & Howell, 2000). Opponents charge that affirmative action amounts to nothing less than preferential treatment, quotas, mandates that force employers and admissions committees to hire or admit unqualified applicants, and reverse discrimination (Bell, Harrison, & McLaughlin, 2000; Fraser & Kick, 2000; Kravitz & Klineberg, 2000). Therefore, those who oppose the policy believe it is fundamentally flawed because it prioritizes group membership over merit.

On the other hand, those who support affirmative action claim that these policies are necessary for leveling a playing field that is still strongly tilted in favor of White males, despite decades of government intervention (Jones, 1997; Kim, 1989; Kuykendall, 1996). They also claim that the benchmarks and timetables laid out by affirmative action policies do not violate merit principles and are small concessions compared to the opportunities offered to dominant groups (Harris & Merida, 1995). In other words, both supporters and opponents seem perpetually to contradict each other when it comes to how they define affirmative action: Does it, in reality, promote racial and gender equity and minority representation, or is it a policy that promotes reverse discrimination and quotas?

Public opinion about race-targeted policies can be strongly influenced by how those policies are framed (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993), and several studies have shown that framing influences beliefs about affirmative action (Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Kuklinski et al., 1997; Murrell, Dietz-Uhler, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Drout, 1994; Quinn, Ross, & Esses, 2001; see also Entman & Rojecki, 2000). Although people may not be able to agree on what affirmative action is, they may be able to agree on what are good and bad applications of affirmative action. People seem to concur that preferential-selection procedures that favor unqualified candidates over qualified candidates are wrong (Bobocel et al., 1998; Fraser & Kick, 2000; Heilman, McCullough, & Gilbert, 1996; Plous, 2003). Although people generally oppose preferential selection, people are more supportive of policies that involve the selection of women and minority members among equal or roughly comparable candidates (Kravitz & Platania, 1993; Heilman, Battle, Keller, & Lee, 1998; Turner & Pratkanis, 1994).

The evidence on framing affirmative action suggests a common theme echoed by both sides of the debate: the importance of merit (see Crosby, 2004; Crosby, Iyer, Clayton, & Downing, 2003). It may not be the case that supporters or opponents of affirmative action care more or less about merit. Rather, supporters may think of affirmative action in terms of merit-upholding applications, whereas opponents may think of affirmative action in terms of merit-violating applications. In other words, supporters and opponents may equally care about abstract principles of merit; they just see affirmative action as differentially upholding or
violating these principles. This conjecture would suggest that the different factions in the battle over affirmative action may have more in common with each other than is often portrayed in the popular media and in the academic literature.

**Racism and Perceptions of Merit**

Some researchers claim that using merit-based explanations for opposition to race-targeted policies like affirmative action actually may be a strategy used to justify underlying racism. A wide range of research has pointed to racism as one of the driving factors behind affirmative action opposition (e.g., Federico & Sidanius, 2002a, 2002b; Sears & Henry, 2003; Sears et al., 1997; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). If people believe that ethnic minorities who benefit from affirmative action are less capable, less hard working, and thus less qualified than Whites, then they may perceive any policy that gives opportunities to these groups as violating merit. Symbolic racism theory in particular proposes that modern-day racism is influenced strongly by concerns of merit and personal effort (Sears & Henry, 2003; Sears & Henry, 2005).

If racism is mostly driving opposition to affirmative action, then any reframing of this issue is unlikely to affect greater support for affirmative action policy. However, if even those who have anti-Black attitudes support some AAPs depending on how merit-conscious the policy is, then it may be possible to bridge the gap between affirmative action support and opposition, as well as to reduce the influence of racism in social policies. Consequently, our study also examines the ways that those who score high in racism consider affirmative action policies compared to those who score low in racism. We predict that even those who score higher on measures of racism will be moved to support affirmative action policies that are framed in terms of merit.

**Overview of Studies**

Previous research has found that the merit considerations influence attitudes towards affirmative action (e.g., Bobocel et al., 1998; Heilman et al., 1998). However, these studies have stopped short of examining the beliefs of those who form support and opposition camps, how these beliefs differ, and more importantly, how they converge on attitudes toward affirmative action policies. Given that these camps represent the major voting blocks that will determine the fate of this policy, it is important to learn what drives their perceptions of affirmative action.

We focused on two important questions: Do supporters and opponents of affirmative action, and those low and high in negative racial attitudes, think of affirmative action differently in merit-upholding versus merit-violating terms? However, is there also evidence that affirmative action supporters and opponents, as well as nonracists and racists, in fact care about merit principles in similar
ways? To address these questions, we asked participants about their support for affirmative action in the abstract, and split our respondents into “supporters” and “opponents” of general affirmative action policy. We also assessed racism and split our sample into those who endorse negative racial attitudes and those who do not. We then asked participants how often they thought of affirmative action using merit-violating or merit-upholding AAP frames. We also asked how much a participant would support affirmative action, using the identical AAP frames.

Regarding perceptions of affirmative action frames among supporters versus opponents of AAP, we predicted an interaction between support/opposition to affirmative action and the type of AAP frame typically invoked: Supporters were expected to perceive affirmative action as involving more merit-upholding programs, and opponents as involving more merit-violating programs. However, we did not expect an interaction when asking respondents if they support or oppose merit-violating AAPs. Thus, where we expect to find more agreement between supporters and opponents is not in the affirmative action frames that come to mind, but on which types of affirmative action deserve support and which do not. Specifically, we expected that participants in different camps would show more opposition to AAPs that violate or ignore merit, but would support more AAPs that focus on qualifications and merit. Finally, we expected a similar pattern to cut across lines of racism, such that we expected nonracists also to think of affirmative action in merit-upholding terms, and racists to think of affirmative action in merit-violating terms. However, as with the differences between supporters and opponents of AAPs, we expected to find no interaction between racism and support for merit-upholding versus merit-violating forms of affirmative action. In other words, we expected that even those high in negative racial attitudes will endorse affirmative action policies that are framed in merit-upholding ways and that even those low in negative racial attitudes will be persuaded to reject affirmative action policies that are framed in merit-violating ways.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Data were collected from two samples, a student sample and a community sample. The student sample consisted of 277 college students from eight colleges and universities throughout the Chicagoland area (122 men and 155 women) who volunteered for this study. The ethnicities were as follows: 10.2% African American, 41.1% White, 12% Asian/Pacific Islander, 14.3% Latino, 12.8% Middle Eastern/Indian, and 9.8% of mixed ethnicity. The mean age of participants in the sample was 20 years old, ranging from 18 to 41 years of age.

The community sample consisted of 430 Chicago area residents including residents of northwest Indiana and southern Wisconsin (206 men and 221 women). The distribution of ethnicity was as follows: 28.9% African American,
43.4% White, 3.7% Asian/Pacific Islander, 12.6% Latino, 1.2% Native American, 3.2% Middle Eastern/Indian, and 6.3% of mixed ethnicity. The mean age of participants in the sample was 31 years old, ranging from 16 to 80 years of age. Participants were sampled from a variety of locations including shopping malls, airports, train and bus stations, laundromats, coffee shops, beaches, and businesses in diverse communities throughout Chicago.

Materials

The items we considered in this study were taken from three subsections of the questionnaire booklet: general assessment of affirmative action attitudes; perceptions of the manifestations of affirmative action policy; and support or opposition to specific manifestations of affirmative action.

General assessment of affirmative action attitudes. Participants were first asked, “In general, do you support or oppose affirmative action?” This question was always asked first in order to avoid any biasing from the questions that followed about different types of affirmative action (e.g., quotas), and represented the key independent variable into which participants were divided into opponents versus supporters of affirmative action. Responses were measured on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly support) to 4 (strongly oppose). A participant was categorized in the “oppose” affirmative action group if they responded “somewhat oppose” or “strongly oppose” and was in the “support” affirmative action group if they responded “somewhat support” or “strongly support,” to this general affirmative action question.

Perceptions of the manifestations of affirmative action policy. In order to discover if participants who support or oppose affirmative action have different kinds of policies of affirmative action in mind, participants were asked to “indicate how often you think of affirmative action in these terms.” There were seven items for assessing perceptions of different possible AAPs: “Quotas, that is, setting aside places for certain groups,” “Using membership in certain groups as a tie-breaker when applicants are equally qualified,” “Giving training to certain groups so they can compete equally,” “Making a special effort to find qualified people from certain groups,” “Giving preference to minorities to make up for past discrimination,” “Giving preference to members of certain groups who are less qualified than someone else,” and “Reverse discrimination. That is, denying qualified members of majority groups opportunities in order to give those opportunities to members of minority groups.” These items were assessed on a 4-point scale (1 = not at all, 4 = very often).

Support or opposition to specific manifestations of affirmative action. The participants were also asked “how do you feel about different kinds of affirmative action?” using the identical seven items that were used in the perceptions of AAPs. These items were assessed on a 4-point scale (1 = strongly oppose, 4 = strongly support).
Negative racial attitudes. Participants were asked five questions that were designed to assess negative racial attitudes, adapted from the symbolic racism scale (see Henry & Sears, 2002): “It’s really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if African-Americans/Blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as Whites;” “If African-Americans/Blacks work hard they almost always get what they want;” “The Irish, Italians, Jews and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. African-Americans/Blacks should do the same without any special favors;” “African-Americans/Blacks are getting too demanding in their push for equal rights;” “Generations of discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for African-Americans/Blacks to work their way out of the lower class (reverse coded).” These items were measured on a 7-point scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree and were combined to form a symbolic racism scale (Cronbach’s alpha = .73 for the community sample and .83 for the student sample). Participants were categorized as low in racism if they scored below the midpoint on the scale (N = 146 and 166 for the student and community samples, respectively), and as high in racism if they scored above the midpoint on the scale (N = 118 and 153 in the student and community samples, respectively). Those who scored at the midpoint were not included in analyses involving symbolic racism (N = 34 and 65 for the student and community samples, respectively).

Results

Factor Analyses and Scaling

In order to test our first hypothesis, that different AAPs can be separated into either merit violating or merit upholding manifestations, we conducted a series of factor analyses. A separate factor analysis was conducted for each sample for both sets of questions concerning AAPs: “How often do you think of affirmative action in these terms?” and “How do you feel about different kinds of affirmative action?” We extracted the factors using the principal components method and examined all factors with eigenvalues greater than one. Factors were rotated orthogonally using a verimax rotation. Based on the factor analysis results, we constructed scales to represent merit-upholding versus merit-violating manifestations of AAPs based on those items with a clear factor loading of .50 or better in both samples.

Perceptions of affirmative action policies. Our first set of analyses involved the question “How often do you think of affirmative action in these terms?” In both samples, two similar factors emerged (see Table 1, left side). One factor consisted of AAPs that violate merit principles: quotas, reverse discrimination, hiring unqualified minorities, and giving preference to minorities to make up for past discrimination. These items were combined into a merit-violating AAPs scale, alpha = .72 and .78 for the student and community samples, respectively. The second factor consisted of AAPs that focused on merit-upholding strategies:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>“How often do you think of affirmative action in these terms?”</th>
<th>“How do you personally feel about these different aspects of affirmative action?”</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Sample</td>
<td>Community Sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Factor1</td>
<td>Factor2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reverse discrimination. That is, denying qualified members of majority groups opportunities in order to give those opportunities to members of minority groups.</td>
<td>.823</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving preference to members of certain groups who are less qualified than someone else.</td>
<td>.788</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giving preference to minorities to make up for past discrimination.</td>
<td>.681</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quotas, that is, setting aside places for certain groups.</td>
<td>.626</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giving training to certain groups so they can compete equally.</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.805</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making a special effort to find qualified people from certain groups.</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.791</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using membership in certain groups as a tie-breaker when applicants are equally qualified.</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eigenvalues</strong></td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>1.53</td>
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*Note.* A dash (—) indicates items with loadings less than .40.
providing training so groups can compete equally and recruiting qualified minorities. These two items loaded strongly on the second factor in both samples, but a third item—using membership as a tie-breaker when people are equally qualified—did not load on either factor in the student sample and loaded moderately on both factors in the community sample and thus was not included in either policy scale. The merit-upholding AAPs scale had alphas of .60 and .69 for the student and community samples, respectively.

Support for or opposition to specific manifestations of affirmative action. The second set of analyses asked participants about their support for (or opposition to) different specific manifestations of affirmative action. Once again, the factor solutions revealed two similar factors in both samples (see Table 1, right side). These factors consisted of the same items that emerged in the factor solution for the set of questions about the perception of different AAPs. The merit-violating scale had an alpha = .74 and .79 for the student and community samples, respectively. The merit-upholding scale had alphas of .67 and .62 for the student and community samples, respectively. Once again, the item pertaining to using membership as a tiebreaker when people are equally qualified loaded moderately on both factors in both samples and thus was not included in either policy scale.

Testing the Main Hypotheses: ANOVA Analyses

Before testing our main hypotheses, we wanted to know whether our groups of supporters versus opponents of affirmative action were sufficiently different from our groups of those who scored low versus high in racism. This was important because of assertions that opposition to affirmative action is simply racism in disguise. We correlated general support or opposition to affirmative action with our symbolic racism scale in both the student and community samples. As expected, racism was related to opposition to affirmative action in both the student sample (r = .313, p < .001) and the community sample (r = .220, p < .001); however, the variance was not completely overlapping. Therefore, we separated our analyses involving supporters and opponents from our analyses involving racists and nonracists.

Perceptions of affirmative action policies: Support vs. opposition. The first ANOVA was a 2 (general affirmative action support: support vs. opposition) × 2 (type of policy: merit-violating vs. merit-upholding) mixed-model analysis to test the hypothesis that those who support and oppose affirmative action actually have very different policies in mind. In the student sample, there was a significant main effect of policy type such that participants in general were more likely to think of merit-violating policies (M = 2.75, SE = .046) than merit-upholding policies (M = 2.46, SE = .049) when thinking about affirmative action, F (1, 256) = 18.82, p < .001. However, this main effect was qualified by a significant policy × support interaction, F (1, 256) = 56.82, p < .001 (see upper left of Table 2). Those who support affirmative action were more likely to have in mind AAPs that uphold
merit principles ($M = 2.67, SE = .053$) than programs that violate merit principles ($M = 2.46, SE = .050$, means significantly different at the 95% confidence interval). The opposite pattern was true for those who oppose affirmative action, who were more likely to have in mind AAPs that violate merit principles ($M = 3.04, SE = .077$) than programs that uphold merit principles ($M = 2.25, SE = .082$, means significantly different at the 95% confidence interval).

For the community sample, there were no main effects. Only a significant interaction emerged, $F(1, 360) = 24.89, p < .001$ (see upper right of Table 2). Those who support affirmative action were more likely to have in mind AAPs that uphold merit ($M = 2.97, SE = .051$) than programs that violate merit ($M = 2.57, SE = .046$, means significantly different at the 95% confidence interval), while those who oppose affirmative action were more likely to see the policy as involving merit-violating programs ($M = 2.71, SE = .073$) than merit-upholding programs ($M = 2.77, SE = .081$, means significantly different at the 95% confidence interval).

Perceptions of affirmative action policies: Low racism vs. high racism. Our second ANOVA was a 2 (racism: low vs. high) $\times$ 2 (type of policy: merit-violating vs. merit-upholding) mixed-model analysis to test the hypothesis that those who are low versus high in negative racial attitudes also have very different policies in mind when thinking about affirmative action. In the student sample, there was a significant policy $\times$ support interaction, $F(1, 262) = 11.72, p = .001$ (see bottom left of Table 2). Those who scored low on racism were more likely to have in mind AAPs that uphold merit principles ($M = 2.60, SE = .062$) than programs that violate merit principles ($M = 2.47, SE = .056$, means significantly different at the 95% confidence interval). The opposite pattern was true for those who scored high in racism, who were more likely to have in mind AAPs that violate merit principles ($M = 2.83, SE = .063$) than programs that uphold merit principles ($M = 2.51, SE = .069$, means significantly different at the 95% confidence interval).1

1 Interestingly, there was also a significant main effect of racism, such that those higher in racism thought about affirmative action in all its manifestations more than nonracists, $F(1, 262) = 5.01, p = .03.$
For the community sample, there was a main effect of policy type such that, regardless of level of racism, participants in general were more likely to see affirmative action as merit-upholding \((M = 2.86, SE = .046)\) than merit-violating \((M = 2.69, SE = .044)\), \(F(1, 317) = 7.80, p = .006\). However, this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction, \(F(1, 317) = 22.41, p < .001\) (see bottom right of Table 2). Once again, those who scored low in racism were more likely to have in mind AAPs that uphold merit \((M = 3.07, SE = .064)\) than programs that violate merit \((M = 2.60, SE = .061\), means significantly different at the 95% confidence interval), while those who oppose affirmative action did not show this difference and were more likely to see the policy as merit-violating \((M = 2.77, SE = .064)\) than merit-upholding \((M = 2.65, SE = .066, \text{although this difference did not reach significance})\).

Attitudes toward specific manifestations of affirmative action: Support vs. opposition. Finally, we tested the prediction that, despite the fact that supporters and opponents of affirmative action, as well as racist and nonracists, have very different conceptualizations of affirmative action, they actually agree more than they disagree on the types of AAPs they support and oppose.

We conducted a 2 (general affirmative action support: support vs. opposition) × 2 (type of policy: merit-violating vs. merit-upholding) mixed-model ANOVA. However, this time we were expecting to get only main effects (primarily a policy main effect) and not an interaction. In the student sample, two significant main effects emerged. Not surprisingly, those who support affirmative action in general were more supportive of AAPs overall \((M = 2.62, SE = .035)\) compared to those who oppose the policy \((M = 2.05, SE = .052)\), \(F(1, 251) = 81.31, p < .001\). More important, there was also a significant main effect of program type. Regardless of one’s position on affirmative action, participants were more likely to support AAPs that uphold merit principles \((M = 2.92, SE = .048)\) than programs that violate merit principles \((M = 1.75, SE = .039)\), \(F(1, 251) = 366.84, p < .001\). As predicted, the interaction was not statistically significant (upper left of Table 3).

| Table 3. Results from ANOVA Analyses Comparing Supporters and Opponents, and Those Low in Racism and High in Racism, on Support for Merit Violating and Merit Upholding Policies |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Student Sample | Community Sample | | |
| | Merit Violating | Merit Upholding | Merit Violating | Merit Upholding |
| Support | 2.08 | 3.15 | 2.22 | 2.98 |
| Opposition | 1.43 | 2.68 | 1.77 | 2.69 |
| Low Racism | 1.99 | 3.23 | 2.17 | 3.07 |
| High Racism | 1.75 | 2.74 | 1.93 | 2.65 |

“How do you feel about these different kinds of affirmative action?”

\((1 = \text{Strongly oppose}; 4 = \text{Strongly support})\)”
The pattern was identical in the community sample. There was a significant main effect, such that those who support affirmative action in general were more supportive of AAPs overall ($M = 2.60$, $SE = .039$) compared to those who oppose affirmative action in general ($M = 2.23$, $SE = .062$), $F (1, 363) = 25.36, p < .001$. But more important was the significant main effect of program type. Regardless of one’s position on affirmative action, participants were more likely to support AAPs that uphold merit principles ($M = 2.83$, $SE = .048$) than programs that violate merit principles ($M = 1.99$, $SE = .046$), $F (1, 363) = 212.30, p < .001$. Once again, however, the interaction was not statistically significant (see upper right of Table 3).

**Attitudes towards specific manifestations of affirmative action: Low vs. high racism.** Next, we tested this hypothesis with a 2 (racism: low vs. high) × 2 (type of policy: merit-violating vs. merit-upholding) mixed-model ANOVA. In the student sample, two significant main effects emerged. As expected, those who scored low on racism were more supportive of AAPs overall ($M = 2.61$, $SE = .041$) compared to those who scored high ($M = 2.25$, $SE = .046$), $F (1, 256) = 35.40, p < .001$. More important, there was also a significant main effect of program type. Regardless of racial attitudes, participants were more likely to support AAPs that uphold merit principles ($M = 2.99$, $SE = .044$) than programs that violate merit principles ($M = 1.87$, $SE = .039$), $F (1, 251) = 366.84, p < .001$.

Unlike the supporters and opponents, a significant interaction did emerge among those low and high in racism in the student sample, $F (1, 251) = 4.95, p = .027$. As seen in the lower left of Table 3, those who were low as well as those who were high in racism were both significantly more likely to support AAPs that upheld the merit principle ($M = 3.23$, $SE = .058$ for nonracists; $M = 2.74$, $SE = .065$ for racists) than AAPs that violated the merit principle ($M = 1.99$, $SE = .053$ for non-racists; $M = 1.75$, $SE = .058$ for racists); however, this difference was more dramatic for those low in racism. It is important to note that despite this interaction, the absolute value of support for merit-oriented AAPs among racists indicates that they would in fact support affirmative action policies that upheld merit.

In the community sample there was a significant main effect of racism, such that those who scored low in symbolic racism were more supportive of AAPs overall ($M = 2.62$, $SE = .051$) compared to those who scored high in racism ($M = 2.29$, $SE = .052$), $F (1, 321) = 20.41, p < .001$. But more important was the significant main effect of program type. Regardless of level of racism, participants were more likely to support AAPs that uphold merit principles ($M = 2.86$, $SE = .046$) than programs that violate merit principles ($M = 2.05$, $SE = .044$), $F (1, 321) = 231.88, p < .001$. Unlike the student sample (but consistent with the data concerning affirmative action supporters and opponents), the interaction was not statistically significant (lower right of Table 3).
Discussion

The current set of studies demonstrates that those who support affirmative action and those who oppose it (for racist or nonracist reasons) are in fact supporting and opposing very different policies and programs. We claim that both groups are concerned about merit principles when it comes to affirmative action, but the difference in support lies in whether or not an individual believes that affirmative action policies are using merit as a criterion. Although previous research has demonstrated that the packaging of affirmative action can influence overall support for affirmative action policy, little research has been devoted to exploring the common ground that opponents and supporters, or racists and nonracists, have with respect to appropriate applications of AAPs. Most policy theorists and policy makers overestimate the split between differing camps on affirmative action, and might expect that this cleavage would maintain regardless of the packaging of AAPs.

Contrary to popular discourse that treats affirmative action in blanket terms, there seems to be no single concept of affirmative action that currently is being debated in political circles. Rather, supporters and opponents are actually arguing about very different, and ultimately incompatible, programs when debating affirmative action. Supporters see affirmative action as involving programs that promote qualified minorities; however, opponents see the policy as promoting diversity at the expense of merit, fairness, and qualification. Despite these diametrical views, both camps actually agree more than they disagree on what are ideal forms of affirmative action. Members of both camps support programs that provide opportunities to qualified minorities, and they both eschew programs that violate the merit principle. Therefore, while supporters and opponents of affirmative action seem to perceive a very different policy and speak a different language about that policy, they may in fact share a significant and meaningful parcel of common ground.

There are two important considerations to note about these findings. First, the data showed different patterns of results between the perceptions one has of AAPs versus support for those same AAPs, despite the fact that these types of programs were otherwise worded identically and factored on the same factors from one set of questions to the other. Second, these overall patterns of results were nearly identical from one sample to the other, despite the fact that both samples came from very different backgrounds (college students versus community adults) and had very different ethnic distributions. Both the subtlety of our measures and the robustness of our replication lend greater overall credibility to our findings.

Even more dramatic was the pattern of results for racists and nonracists. It comes as no surprise that those who endorse anti-Black attitudes would use issues of merit to justify opposition to programs that benefit Blacks. However, even those high in racism were willing to support AAPs that are rooted in merit. This finding
suggests that there are limits to the influence of prejudice in political policy decisions. When policies appear to conform to stereotypical conceptualizations of a group (such as hiring Blacks who are under qualified), it is easy for people who are prejudiced to oppose such policies. On the other hand, policies that appear to be fair in their own right are harder to dismiss and may even be judged more objectively, even by prejudiced voters.

Finally, these results have important implications for affirmative action legislation. Affirmative action is currently facing strong opposition in courtrooms and voting booths across the country, and the fate of this policy is uncertain. Policy makers and the public at large need to develop a better understanding of what drives affirmative action attitudes, and more important, which programs are ideal and which are prone to controversy. By identifying and distinguishing these different programs, legislators and organizations can focus on developing affirmative action programs that promote better opportunities for underrepresented groups while avoiding programs that are politically and socially divisive.

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