

# Poll: Public split on affirmative action's importance

WASHINGTON (AP) - Most Americans agree that diverse student communities are good for colleges, and a majority agree that the United States is not close to ending discrimination, an Associated Press poll finds.

Americans are sharply divided on how to achieve diversity.

Four in five Americans say it's important that colleges have racially diverse student bodies, but only half think affirmative action still is needed to help blacks, Hispanics and other minorities, the poll said.

Blacks and whites have dramatically differing views about how to achieve diversity, says the poll, conducted for the AP by ICR/International Communications Research of Media, Pa. A slight majority in the overall poll thinks affirmative action programs still are necessary - 51 percent to 43 percent. Among blacks, 89 percent think those programs are necessary. About six in 10 young adults in the poll, from 18 to 34 years old, said affirmative action is still needed.

Thomas Robinson, a re-

tired school administrator from Woodsfield, Ohio, offers a glimpse into the mixed emotions many whites have on the issue. He thinks the country has overcome much of the racism from past days but is not yet close to eliminating it. But he does not support affirmative action.

"At one time it was needed, but I think it should be abolished," said Robinson, who has a carpentry business to help pay his bills. "Whites are losing out, because affirmative action bumps them out."

Affirmative action is getting its biggest legal test in a quarter-century, a challenge to admissions policies at the University of Michigan and its law school that is before the Supreme Court. The case will be argued April 1, with a decision expected by summer.

The case marks the court's first statement on racial preference programs in academic admissions since the 1978 Bakke case, which affirmative action critics and backers alike say has muddied the waters ever since.

In that case, the court voted

5-4 to outlaw racial quotas in university admissions, but left room for race to be a factor considered in admissions. Michigan and many other public universities have used the ruling to design programs that can help minorities who might be rejected if only test scores and grades were considered.

Katy Dominy, 22, is one of those who thinks diversity at colleges is very important.

"I think it's very important so we can learn from one another," said the white medical assistant from Sweet

Home, Ore. "We can learn many things from people of other countries that you can't get out of a textbook."

The base of support for affirmative action in this country is difficult to measure, because even a small change in the emphasis of a poll question can bring dramatically different results.

When people were asked in the AP poll if they thought programs should be continued that give "advantages and preferences" to blacks, Hispanics and other minorities in hiring, promotions and

college admissions, 53 percent said yes. Another 35 percent said those programs should be abolished. The AP poll of 1,013 adults was taken Feb. 28-March 4 and has an error margin of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

When people were asked recently in another poll if race should be used as a factor in college admissions, people were opposed by a 2-1 margin.

President Bush, explaining his opposition to the Michigan program, called it "a quota system based solely

on race." The president says there are better methods of achieving campus diversity. Backers of the Michigan approach say it's not a quota system but considers race among many factors considered.

Jacqueline Love, a retired special education counselor from Detroit, says affirmative action helped her get her job many years ago helping students with special needs. The black retiree says plenty of people, other minorities as well as blacks, still need a chance like the one she got.

## Pa. committee urges halt to death penalty

PITTSBURGH (AP) - Pennsylvania should order a moratorium on executions while the governor and the state Supreme Court review a study that found black defendants are more likely to be sentenced to death, a committee said.

Since October 1999, the Committee on Racial and Gender Bias in the Justice System, appointed by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, has studied race, ethnicity and gender issues in the courts. It released a 550-page report Tuesday, calling on Gov. Ed Rendell and the court to order the moratorium.

"We acted beyond our role. We realized that the recommended changes did not lie solely within the courts," said Nicholas Cafardi, dean of Duquesne University's School of Law and the committee chairman.

The report addressed several issues, including gender bias in jury selection, a lack of diversity in jury pools and the courts' treatment of sexual assault victims. It also said many defense attorneys in death penalty cases need better pay and standardized training.


In calling for a moratorium, the report cited studies of Philadelphia's courts and statistics showing that blacks make up 62 percent of Pennsylvania's 242 death row inmates but only 10 percent of the state's general population.

Kent Scheidegger of the Criminal Justice Legal Foundation, which supports the death penalty, said those studies were written by researchers biased against capital punishment. "The system is generally fair. It's been studied, reformed and tinkered with for 30 years now," he said.

Rendell, a former Philadelphia prosecutor and mayor, supports the death penalty, but has said he would review the issue if warranted. A spokesman for Rendell did not return calls Tuesday.

Cafardi said it will be up to two new task forces established by the Supreme Court to find ways to implement the committee's recommendations, including the collection of data on capital litigation.

There have been calls for moratoriums in several states, but they have only taken effect in Illinois and Maryland. Maryland's new governor, Robert Ehrlich, lifted the moratorium when he took office in January.



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