

HOW MUCH WILL RESTORATION OF RACIAL PREFERENCES MATTER IN CALIFORNIA?

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California's Proposition 16 on the November ballot would restore racial and gender-based preferences in college admissions, public contracting, and public hiring. These preferences ended in 1996, when Californians voted by a two-thirds majority to amend the state constitution and prohibit race and gender preferences.

If voters choose to amend the constitution again, just how much will racial preferences matter for college admissions? If previous preferential admissions decisions are any guide, they will matter a lot. While Proposition 16 will also require a supermajority vote to amend the constitution, it has already hopped that hurdle in both the state Senate and Assembly, in both of which the Democratic party has supermajorities.

Before these preferences ended, college admissions decisions reflected significant racial preferences. A new report shows very large SAT and GPA differences across demographic groups in college admissions in 1995, the year before the elimination of race- and gender-based preferences.

The statistics below show the 1995 median verbal and math SAT scores and median GPA for students admitted to UC Berkeley, arguably the most difficult University of California campus to gain admissions to at that time.

| | Math SAT Score | Verbal SAT Score | GPA |
|--|----------------|------------------|-----|
|--|----------------|------------------|-----|

| | | | |
|--------|-----|-----|------|
| Blacks | 510 | 450 | 3.42 |
|--------|-----|-----|------|

| | | | |
|-----------|-----|-----|------|
| Hispanics | 540 | 480 | 3.75 |
|-----------|-----|-----|------|

| | | | |
|--------|-----|-----|------|
| Asians | 710 | 590 | 4.00 |
|--------|-----|-----|------|

| | | | |
|--------|-----|-----|------|
| Whites | 690 | 600 | 4.00 |
|--------|-----|-----|------|

These statistics show that college admissions decisions reflected very large differences in test scores and GPA across these demographic groups, indicating that preferences were indeed sizable twenty-five years ago. Moreover, it shows that Asians were held to much higher standards than other minorities. Since the preferences are purely race-based, this suggests that children of wealthy Hispanic and Black families were preferentially admitted,

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while the higher-scoring children of very poor Asian immigrant families were not. To put this in perspective, the median math SAT score for an admitted Asian student (710) would be in the 99th plus percentile for Black students taking the SAT exam.

Even though the SAT has been suspended for use in University of California admissions decisions until 2024, these data suggest that admission preferences may be large again, given current political and social concerns about underrepresented minorities.

As Californians, we all want our kids to succeed academically and have the opportunity to attend college should they want to do that. As I pointed out earlier, race-based admissions policies may harm those whom they are intended to help by enrolling underrepresented minority students into colleges that are not the best match for them.

The data cited in my earlier column show that minority student academic success improved substantially after race-based preferences were eliminated and that many minority students were not prepared for the UC campuses that they were enrolled in.

Having taught at UCLA, which has similar admissions standards to UC Berkeley, my experience is that students with the SAT scores for Blacks and Hispanics cited above will struggle mightily. Putting unprepared students into a situation where many don't have a realistic chance of succeeding is of course terribly wrong, but this is what has happened under race-based preferences. It is no surprise that these students have succeeded at a much higher rate after racial-based preferences were ended.

Rather than choosing race-based preferences for underrepresented minorities, there is a much better way to advance opportunities: improve K-12 learning outcomes in underperforming schools. California, which previously was ranked at or near the top of state school rankings, is now ranked around 40th in the country. And schools that are home to primarily Black and Hispanic California students are typically woeful underperformers, leaving graduates very poorly prepared for entrance into a university within the UC system.

There are simple, commonsense reforms that will improve learning outcomes and ensure that students are better prepared for college. Reform teacher tenure. Pay the best teachers what they are worth. Eliminate seniority-based layoff rules. Increase competition among schools.

Most teachers' union rules are remnants of union contracting from the 1960s, featuring substantial wage compression, in which high performance doesn't translate into high pay and in which seniority is king. Research shows that these rules are leading potentially highly performing teachers to eschew the teaching profession because they will not be rewarded on their merits. Instead, the rapid award of tenure, in which it becomes nearly impossible to fire a teacher for cause, is leading individuals who most highly value job security not the desire to teach into the teaching profession.

How to reform? First, increase the time to tenure evaluation. In many schools, tenure is awarded after just eighteen months of teaching. Second, implement merit-based pay that rewards the best teachers and pays them accordingly. Third, eliminate most seniority-based rules. Fourth, increase school choice, particularly for those families in the poorest neighborhoods so that their children will not have to attend a poorly performing monopolist public school.

These simple reforms will lead to better learning outcomes and produce high school graduates who are much better prepared for college academics. Most importantly, these reforms will create a more level playing field in California's public education system. Isn't that what we all really want?

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