

“Soft” Affirmative Action and Minority Recruitment (Fershtman and Pavan, 2021)

There has been an increasing concern about the underrepresentation of minorities in academia, STEM jobs, and politics. Affirmative action, a policy that favors discriminated minorities, has been one solution. For instance, some have turned to “hard” affirmative action to ensure that a percent of parliament seats should be female. Others have gone for a “soft” approach, where they make sure that a percentage of the candidates for a position should be female. This approach gives minorities equal chance to get the position but does not put a constraint on the final group like “hard” affirmative action.

One Sentence Summary

“Soft” affirmative action policies can reduce minority hiring, even if the candidates of both groups are equally qualified.

Main Findings

Fershtman and Pavan (2021) describe a simple recruitment model. Imagine there is a search committee to fill one position for a Ph.D. program. The committee can evaluate a single candidate or expand the candidate pool at each period. Ultimately, the committee hires the first person that surpasses a certain quality threshold.

There are two groups of candidates that are equally qualified, let us call them male and female. However, the female candidates have more noise in their quality signal. Intuitively, a search committee can have a harder time discerning the quality of female candidates and often underestimating their quality. In the model, “soft” affirmative action ensures that within each expansion of the candidate pool there should be a higher proportion of females than male candidates.

“Soft” affirmative action combined with a noisier signal of female candidates can lead to a lower probability of hiring a female. The intuition is the following: consider an initial pool with two female and one male candidate. Due to the increased noise, the probability that the committee receives a high-quality signal from the male candidate is higher than the probability of receiving a high-quality signal from one of the female candidates. With “soft” affirmative action, expanding the search pool becomes relatively costly, and thus it is likely that the search committee stops the search after finding a high-quality male candidate.

Concluding Remarks

There is empirical evidence supporting the authors theoretical arguments. DuBois (2016) found the adverse effects of minority recruitment of the *Rooney Rule*¹ prior to 2016. In addition, Sowers (2020) reported that the number of African American head coaches has remained the same since 2003, when the policy was implemented. If we want to promote the representation of minorities, it is imperative to know what policies work and how are they not working to create effective policies.

References

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- Sowers, K., 2020. 49ers’ inclusive culture, highlighted by , is an NFL rarity. *San Francisco Chronicle*. <https://www.sfchronicle.com/49ers/annkillion/article/49ers-inclusive-culture-highlighted-by-Katie-14960471.php>

¹ A “soft” affirmative action policy for the recruitment of head coaches in the NFL.