

Topic: Affirmative action in college admissions

Background

Affirmative action can be traced to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. It is an effort to increase opportunities for racial and ethnic groups that face barriers advancing in the workplace and other institutions, including higher education.

In the 1960s, colleges and universities began to set up admissions policies that gave disadvantaged groups more opportunities. There have been legal challenges through the years, and major Supreme Court decisions have narrowed the scope of these policies. Most recently, the court's ruling in two cases in 2023 severely limited the use of affirmative action in college admissions.

Public opinion polling says ...

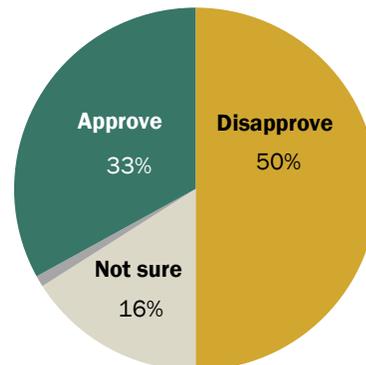
In 2023, Pew Research Center surveyed U.S. adults on this topic. This was just before the Supreme Court announced historic [decisions on the policies at The University of North Carolina and Harvard College](#). It's possible that views on this topic could have changed since those decisions.

The survey did not use the term “affirmative action,” which can be viewed as biased. We asked people whether they approved or disapproved of “selective colleges and universities taking race and ethnicity into account in admissions decisions in order to increase the racial and ethnic diversity at the school.”

- **50%** disapprove of this, with 29% saying they strongly disapprove and 21% saying they disapprove somewhat.
- **33%** approve, with 11% saying they strongly approve and 22% saying they approve somewhat.
- **16%** say they're not sure how they feel.

Views on colleges and universities using race and ethnicity as a factor in admissions decisions

% saying they approve/disapprove of selective colleges and universities taking race and ethnicity into account in admissions decisions in order to increase the racial and ethnic diversity at the school



Note: “Selective colleges and universities” were defined as schools that have many more applicants than they can admit. Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer is shown but not labeled. Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 27-April 2, 2023.

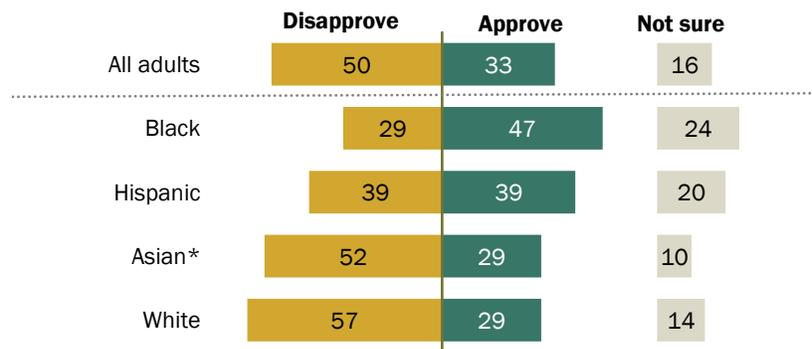
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How views differ by race and ethnicity

- **47%** of Black adults approve of colleges taking race and ethnicity into account in admissions decisions. This is higher than the shares of Hispanic, Asian or White adults who approve.
- **57%** of White adults and a similar share of Asian adults (52%) *disapprove* of these policies. These shares are higher than the shares for Black and Hispanic adults.

How different racial and ethnic groups view colleges and universities using race and ethnicity as a factor in admissions decisions

% saying they approve/disapprove of selective colleges and universities taking race and ethnicity into account in admissions decisions in order to increase the racial and ethnic diversity at the school



* Estimates for Asian adults are representative of English speakers only.

Note: "Selective colleges and universities" were defined as schools that have many more applicants than they can admit. Black, Asian and White adults include those who report being one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanic adults are of any race. Shares of respondents who didn't offer an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 27-April 2, 2023.

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Views on this topic also differ by party: 74% of Republicans and independents who lean to the Republican Party disapprove of colleges taking race and ethnicity into account in admissions decisions. By comparison, 29% of Democrats and Democratic leaners disapprove.

How does the public feel about other factors in college admissions?

In an earlier survey, we asked the public about several factors that could be considered in college admissions decisions, beyond race and ethnicity.

Most Americans – 61% – said **high school grades** should be a major factor in college admissions decisions.

About four-in-ten – 39% – said **standardized test scores** should be a major factor in these decisions.

Relatively few – 7% – said **race or ethnicity** should be a major factor in admissions decisions. About three-quarters of adults (74%) said this should *not* be a factor.

Discussion questions

- Did anything about this data surprise you?
- Why do you think so many Americans say they're "not sure" whether they favor or oppose colleges taking race and ethnicity into account in admissions decisions?
- Why do you think views on this issue differ by race and ethnicity?

Additional resources

Use this QR code to view a web version of this brief and to visit the publications below:



Summary of [Americans' views on affirmative action](#)

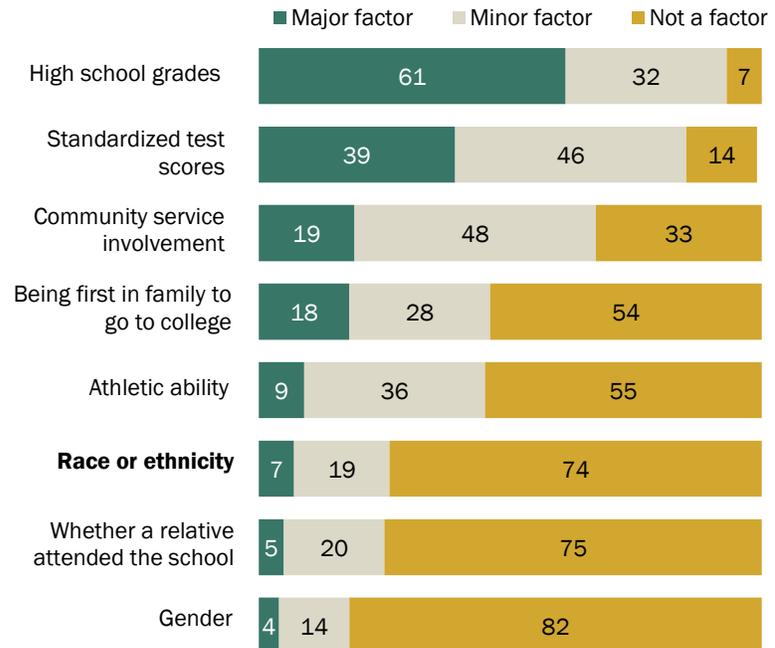
Detailed analysis of [Pew Research Center's 2023 survey on views about colleges and universities taking race and ethnicity into account in admissions decisions](#)

A deeper dive on [views about race and racial inequality in the U.S.](#)

[Racial attitudes and the 2024 election](#)

Views on what factors should be considered in college admissions

% saying each of the following should be a major/minor factor in college admissions decisions



Note: Shares of respondents who didn't offer an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 7-13, 2022.

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