Debate: Why Affirmative Action Should Be Eliminated

While proponents argue in favor of affirmative action, opponents argue against it. They offer the following reasons why affirmative action should be eliminated.

1. Creating preferences for women and minorities results in reverse discrimination. Those opposed to affirmative action believe that discriminating for someone means discriminating against someone else. If equality is the ultimate aim, then discriminating for or against anyone on any basis other than the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to perform jobs is wrong. Equal employment opportunity means that people should compete for jobs according to their qualifications. If any factor such as gender or race is considered in addition to qualifications, then there is discrimination in reverse, which is counter to creating a truly equal society.

2. Affirmative action results in greater polarization and separatism along gender and racial lines. The opponents of affirmative action believe that affirmative action establishes two groups: women and minorities who are in protected classes, and everyone else. For any job, a person will clearly fall into one group or the other. In reality, according to affirmative action classification efforts, women may or may not fall into the "special" category, depending on whether there has been disparate impact on them. Thus, affirmative action may be applicable to some groups but not to others in various employment situations. Regardless of the basis for classification, affirmative action results in males and nonminorities being affected negatively because of their gender or race. Consequently, they become bitter against the protected groups, leading to greater racism or prejudice.

3. Affirmative action stigmatizes those it is designed to help. The opponents of affirmative action cite examples wherein less-qualified women and minorities were given jobs or promotions over more-qualified males and nonminorities. When protected-class individuals perform poorly in jobs because they do not have the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed, the result is to reinforce gender or racial stereotypes.

Because affirmative action has come to be viewed by some people as placing unqualified women and minorities in jobs, it reinforces the beliefs held by some that women and minorities could not succeed on their own efforts. Thus, any women or minority members who have responsible positions are there only because of who they are, not because of what they can do and have done.

4. Affirmative action penalizes individuals (males and nonminorities) even though they have not been guilty of practicing discrimination. Opponents argue that affirmative action is unfair to "innocent victims"--males and nonminorities. These innocent victims had nothing to do with past discrimination or disparate impact and were not even present at the time. Thus, the opponents of affirmative action wonder why these individuals should have to pay for the remediation of these discriminatory actions.

5. Preferences through affirmative action lead to conflicts between protected groups. In this argument, opponents cite examples that illustrate how using preferences for one underrepresented racial minority group has led to discrimination against women or members of another racial-minority group when these groups were adequately represented. Conflict between African American organizations and Asian American organizations are one example. Another is the situation in which Hispanic Americans have sued employers because African Americans were overrepresented.

Closely related is the difficulty of "classifying" people at all. While gender is a bit clearer, melding of races and backgrounds has made racial/ethnic classification difficult. If someone has parents and grandparents from three different ethnic groups, it is difficult to determine how the person should be classified. Thus, focusing on someone's racial/ethnic background may lead to multiple or inaccurate classifications. This process points out the difficulties of classifying people in any way other than by their qualification and abilities, according to those opposed to affirmative action.