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The Political Psychology of Affirmative Action

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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Abstract. This article describes the goals, means, and consequences of affirmative action policies and relates these rationales to policy development and policy understanding and acceptance.

Affirmative action as a set of political policies has generated significant conflict within, between, and among citizens in the United States. This conflict is largely founded on differing understandings and acceptances of the goals, means, and consequences of these policies. And these goals, means, and consequences may be quite different from those formally stated in these policies.

Goals. People may understand and accept an affirmative action policy that may have any one or more of the following goals: (1) to "make up" for "long ago" discrimination towards the ancestors of a group of people; (2) to "make up" for "recent" discrimination towards the ancestors of a group of people; (3) to stop or decrease ongoing discrimination; (4) to find the best candidates for training, tasks, jobs, and other opportunities irrespective of what group from which an individual comes; (5) to ensure that there is some "appropriately equal or equitable" distribution of group representatives for training, tasks, jobs, and other opportunities.

Means. People may understand and accept that a policy's means are intrinsically just or unjust. Or they may understand, accept, and believe that the means, while just or unjust, are compatible or incompatible with ideologies that are, in turn, believed to be worthy of acceptance or lack thereof. Or the means are understood and accepted--a priori or a posteriori--to be compatible or incompatible with goals and consequences of other policies related or unrelated to affirmative action.

Consequences. People may understand and accept that the consequences of a policy are congruent or incongruent with its goals. Or the consequences are believed to be unknown, unclear, highly debatable. Or the consequences are understood and accepted to be helpful to one's own goals and means regardless of impact on discrimination.

Both within, between, and among people, different weights of significance are ascribed to the import of goals, means, and consequences in arriving at some degree of understanding and acceptance of a policy. And through time, these weights change. It is to be expected, then, that there will be changes through time in policy understanding and acceptance.

Although not complete, the above description of understanding and acceptance concerning a policy's goals, means, and consequences illustrates the multiplicity of sources from which conflict concerning policy can arise. This rational, logical, and cognitive approach to affirmative action policy does not even cover emotional and unconscious contributions, nor does it address the psychological and political elements of deceit, corruption, self-interest, and favoritism inherent to policy and its vicissitudes. Irrespective of the goals, means, and consequences of an affirmative action policy, however, the question of policy often being developed and implemented regardless of, or in spite of, the welfare of its alleged beneficiaries can be answered in the affirmative. (See Invasion of the body snatchers as counterespionage threat. (February 21, 1997). IBPP, 1(13); Kravitz, D.A. (January, 1998). Affirmative

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