

# **Nonimmigrants' and Immigrants' Attitudes toward Affirmative Action**

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## **Abstract**

Affirmative action has been evoking much debate and controversy for more than forty years in Western countries and in Israel in the past decade. In both settings, it is fraught with moral and legal disputes. In socially polarized countries such as the U.S. and Israel, the implementation of affirmative-action programs has important social implications due to large inter-group differences that cause minority groups to be underrepresented in higher education and desirable positions. Israel has affirmative-action programs in higher education and public-sector hiring for various target groups such as women, Arab citizens, immigrants from Ethiopia, and persons of low socioeconomic status (SES). While these programs are important for the absorption and social integration of immigrants from Ethiopia, they may be opposed by the majority. The majority's attitudes toward affirmative action are highly important because members of this group may be adversely affected by such programs and may oppose them so vigorously as to undermine their success.

In the U.S., this has given rise to flourishing research on attitudes toward affirmative action, enhancing understanding of the possible public opposition and helping policymakers to design affirmative-action programs that would garner more public support. In contrast, few studies examine attitudes toward affirmative action in Israel. Thus, this study probed the attitudes of nonimmigrants, immigrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU), and immigrants from Ethiopia toward affirmative action that targets three groups: Ethiopian immigrants, FSU immigrants, and people of low SES.

Interaction between the respondents' social groups and the target groups in predicting attitudes toward affirmative action was hypothesized on the basis of four theories—self-interest, group interest, cooperative group

interest, and integrated threat. The 377 nonimmigrants, 287 FSU immigrants, and 252 Ethiopian immigrants who took part in the study were presented with affirmative action measures that were directed at one of the three target groups. The findings confirmed the interaction hypothesis: When the program targeted Ethiopian immigrants, Ethiopian immigrants expressed the most positive attitudes toward it and FSU immigrants opposed it; when the target group was FSU immigrants, FSU immigrants expressed the most positive attitudes and nonimmigrants opposed it; and all three groups supported affirmative action when the target group comprised people of low SES.

The self-interest and group-interest theories may explain the support of Ethiopian immigrants for affirmative action when the target groups are Ethiopian immigrants and people of low SES; these theories may also explain FSU immigrants' support of affirmative action when the target groups are FSU immigrants and people of low SES. The cooperative group-interest theory may explain Ethiopian immigrants' support of affirmative action when the target group is FSU immigrants. The integrated-threat theory may explain three findings: (a) the opposition of the FSU immigrants toward affirmative action when the target group is Ethiopian immigrants; (b) nonimmigrants' opposition to affirmative action when the target group is FSU immigrants; and (c) nonimmigrants' support of affirmative action when the target group is Ethiopian immigrants.

Affirmative-action programs for Ethiopian immigrants may leave fewer programs and resources available for FSU immigrants. In addition, since Ethiopian immigrants' culture is different from that of FSU immigrants, FSU immigrants may feel threatened both realistically and symbolically, inducing them to oppose affirmative action for Ethiopian immigrants.

The integrated-threat theory may also explain nonimmigrants' support of affirmative action for Ethiopian immigrants and their opposition to affirmative action for FSU immigrants: FSU immigrants and nonimmigrants share a similar culture and Ethiopian immigrants do not. As a result, nonimmigrants may feel more threatened symbolically by Ethiopian

immigrants and more threatened realistically by FSU immigrants. The latter threat is more significant in respect of higher education and hiring and results in negative attitudes among nonimmigrants toward affirmative action for FSU immigrants and positive attitudes toward affirmative action for Ethiopian immigrants.

The group-interest and integrated-threat theories also explain the support of all three groups toward affirmative action for people of low SES. This finding suggests the possibility of a recommendation to design affirmative-action programs for low-SES people. Such programs would benefit Ethiopian immigrants, many of whom come from a low SES background, as well as FSU immigrants and nonimmigrants of similar background, and would attract the public support that is necessary for their success.