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## Who Supports Affirmative Action in Brazil?

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**Executive Summary.** The latest edition in the AmericasBarometer *Insights* series examines public support for racial quotas in Brazilian universities. A high percentage of Brazilians believes that reserving slots for Afro-descendants is fair. However, an important minority strongly opposes affirmative action. It turns out that the university educated and whites are most likely to oppose affirmative education. At the lowest educational levels, however, support is very high regardless of the respondent's race. While racism reduces approval of affirmative action, this report finds *no* differences in partisanship or ideology between supporters and opponents of affirmative action.

*The Insights Series presents short reports on topics of interest to the policymaking and academic communities. The series is co-edited by Mitchell A. Seligson, Amy Erica Smith, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister with administrative, technical, and intellectual support from the LAPOP group at Vanderbilt.*

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In the past decade, the racial complexion of Brazil's institutions of higher education has begun to change, the result of a dramatic rise in affirmative action.<sup>1</sup> First implemented by the administration of former President Cardoso in 2001, affirmative action programs are taking hold in a growing share of institutions. A recent study found that 70 percent of Brazil's public universities, both federal and state, have adopted some form of affirmative action (Gois 2010).

These programs aim to redress long-standing, deep racial and socioeconomic inequalities. Through much of the twentieth century, scholars and Brazilian elites held Brazil to be a "racial democracy" untroubled by the problems encountered in the United States (Frazier 1942; Freyre 1973). Prize winning author Carl Degler (1971) argued that because races in the U.S. were divided into "black" vs. "white" while Brazilians had a third broad category of "mulatto," racial prejudices and discrimination were far lower in the latter country. Since 1980, however, activists and researchers have begun to challenge this conventional wisdom, showing that Afro-Brazilians remain deeply disadvantaged in public health outcomes, education, the labor market, and politics (Andrews 1991, 1992; Skidmore 1993, 2003; Telles 2004; Wood and Lovell 1992).

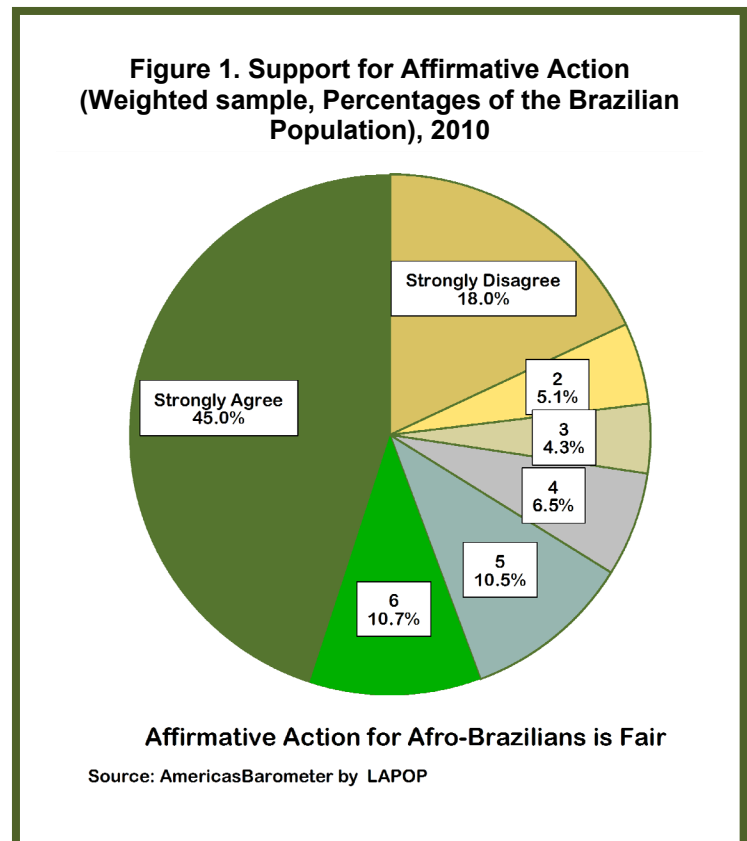
Nonetheless, affirmative action programs have been controversial among Brazilian elites, attracting great media attention and the opposition of important groups of intellectuals. Not only do opponents argue that affirmative action may unfairly disadvantage non-targeted groups; they also hold that it politicizes race in ways that are distinctly un-Brazilian.

But outside of the media limelight, what do ordinary Brazilians think? This report in the *AmericasBarometer Insights Series* examines support for affirmative action in Brazil.<sup>2</sup> Data

come from the 2010 round of the AmericasBarometer surveys by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP).<sup>3</sup> In this round a random, nationally representative sample of 2,482 Brazilians was asked to what extent they agreed with the following statement on a scale from 1 to 7, where "1" represents "Strongly Disagree" and "7" "Strongly Agree":<sup>4</sup>

**RAC2.** It's fair for public universities to reserve spaces for Afro-descendants (people who are black or mulatto).

Figure 1 examines the distribution of responses



on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/surveydata.php>.

<sup>3</sup> Funding for the 2010 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University. The Brazilian survey was undertaken in partnership with the Universidade de Brasília and with the generous support of CNPq, Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (National Council of Technological and Scientific Development).

<sup>4</sup> Item non-response was 8.38% for the sample.

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Edward Telles for kind feedback on this report.  
<sup>2</sup> Prior issues in the Insight series can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>. The data

to this question. The most salient finding is the high level of support for affirmative action. Nearly half of Brazilians strongly agree that reserving university spots for blacks and mulattoes is fair, and more than two-thirds are at least somewhat favorable to this statement, giving it a score of “5,” “6,” or “7.”

This high level of support for affirmative action is striking. Still, two caveats bear keeping in mind. First, in a country where the current president has a fourth grade of formal education (even though he is a highly self-taught individual), access to higher education is outside the reach of most Brazilians, black or white.<sup>5</sup> The average Brazilian might be more magnanimous with a university slot that he or she has little hope of accessing in any case than he or she would be with something closer to home. Thus, support for affirmative action in spheres such as the labor market might be lower than support for such programs in higher education. Unfortunately, the 2010 questionnaire did not include a question on that topic. Second, this question does not directly address the hidden trade-off, namely that a slot given to an Afro-Brazilian will likely mean one less space for a white applicant. We might expect support to be lower when affirmative action is framed in terms of trade-offs. These are all questions that need further exploration in our future surveys.

Figure 1 also shows that an important minority is strongly opposed to affirmative action. One in every six Brazilians strongly disagrees with this public opinion statement, indicating that this group believes that university quotas for Afro-Brazilians are very far from fair.

<sup>5</sup> In 2010, 10% of Brazilians have completed at least one year of higher education, while 38% have completed at least one year of high school (weighted percentages).

What explains the extent to which individual Brazilians agree or disagree with university quotas for Afro-descendants? The next section takes up that question, examining the effects of demographics, racism, and political attitudes.

## Who Supports Affirmative Action?

The first set of factors examined here reflect a set of personal circumstances and demographics that affect *who wins and who loses* from affirmative action. I expect that Brazilians who self-identify as white will oppose affirmative action to a greater extent than will those who self-identify as belonging to other races, simply because whites are most likely to lose out from affirmative action.<sup>6</sup>

*Who wins and who loses from affirmative action? In a country where the current president has a fourth grade formal education, access to higher education is out of the reach of most Brazilians, black or white, regardless of public programs.*

Similarly, I expect attitudes to vary by education and socioeconomic status. Brazilian affirmative action programs target not only blacks but also low-income and public school students. The universities and states that design the programs

<sup>6</sup> As a great many observers have noted, even the notions of “black” and “white” are contested and controversial concepts in Brazil, where most citizens have at least some heritage that is both African and European, and where national discourse for almost a century has celebrated Brazil as a country of racial mixing (Bailey 2008; Nobles 2000; Sansone 2003). I code race as a dummy variable for respondents who self-identify as white, in contrast to brown (*pardo*), black, indigenous, or yellow (meaning Asian). In 2010, the AmericasBarometer survey in Brazil also asked interviewers to rate their own and respondents’ skin colors using a color palette with 11 possible ratings, running from very dark to very light. These ratings are highly correlated with self-identified race, and the following results hold if skin color is substituted for self-identified race. Most of Brazil’s affirmative action programs allow black and mulatto students to self-identify, but a few have boards rate applicants’ racial classifications based on their photos.

typically exclude higher status Afro-Brazilians (Gois 2010). Those Brazilians who are already university educated are most likely to perceive affirmative action as at best unnecessary and at worst a threat to the future educational advancement of their own children and social network members, who would presumably have access to higher education without such programs. Those with secondary educations may be most likely to benefit from affirmative action.

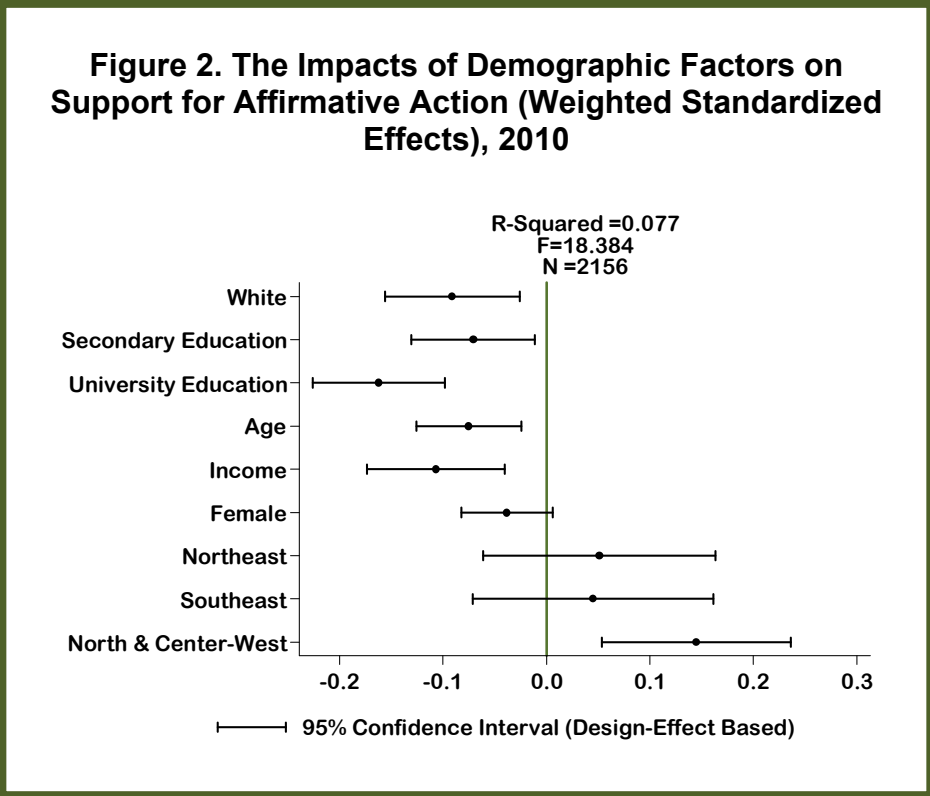
Finally, self-interest is unlikely to matter much at all for the lowest educational group, which has little access to universities regardless of whether affirmative action is implemented. Even with affirmative action, Afro-Brazilians must take an entrance exam known as a *vestibular* and must complete high school to get into a university. Affirmative action merely sets lower standards for Afro-Brazilians' performance, using either quotas or some kind of a "bonus." Adult respondents with an 8th grade or lower formal education have little opportunity to clear these hurdles. As a result, affirmative action within universities does *not* benefit the poorest of the poor; rather, it gives a leg up to Afro-Brazilians who are already in the top half of the educational distribution. For those in the lowest educational group, then, the question is likely to evoke not self-interest, but symbolic attitudes regarding the desirability of opening up elite institutions to the disadvantaged.

As a result of these considerations, I assess the extent to which affirmative action attitudes are predicted by having either a higher or a secondary education, as well as by respondents' incomes.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Those who report that their last full year of schooling was grades 9, 10, or 11 are coded as having a secondary education. Those who report 12 or more completed years of schooling are coded as having a higher education. The

Several other demographic factors might affect support for affirmative action: age, gender, and region of residence. With respect to the latter, the literature suggests that discrimination against Afro-Brazilians varies across the country, and is greater in the Southeast and South regions (Lovell 2000; Twine 1998).

Figure 2 presents results of a linear regression model in which I examine the extent to which race, education, income, age (coded in number of years), gender, and region affect attitudes towards affirmative action in Brazil. All variables are standardized for ease of comparison. Dots represent the estimated effect of each variable, while the horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals for those effects. We can be at least 95% confident that a given effect is statistically significant if its confidence interval does not cross the vertical axis at 0. Effects to the left of the vertical axis are negative; ones to the right are positive.



baseline category thus includes all respondents with an eighth grade education or lower. Income is coded using an 11-point scale based on the number of minimum wages a respondent receives per month.

It turns out that having a university education (compared to having a primary education or lower) is the single strongest predictor of attitudes on this issue, such that the university-educated disagree much more strongly with the statement that university quotas are fair than respondents of any other educational group. Furthermore, I find that those with secondary educations also have significantly lower support for affirmative action than do those at lower educational levels. Thus, the strongest opposition to affirmative action in education comes from those who are already benefiting from (or have benefited from) the system prior to the introduction of affirmative action.

Beyond educational level, the respondent's race also has an important effect on his or her attitudes toward affirmative action, with whites being less favorable toward this program, controlling for all other demographic and socio-economic factors shown in Figure 2. And income is also a significant predictor; as Brazilians' incomes increase, they become more negative regarding university quotas for blacks. Taken together, the findings for education, race, and income suggest that self-interest plays a very important role in affecting which Brazilians support affirmative action and which Brazilians oppose it. Thus, those with more education, money and who are whiter are less supportive of affirmative action in a country in which average public opinion highly supports it. However, those with the least at stake—those with very low educational levels, who would be unable to access universities in any case—are the most supportive of affirmative action. As I argue above, this may be because respondents with primary or lower educations answer this question based on their desire to democratize elite institutions.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> There are a couple of other possible interpretations of the very high levels of support at the lowest educational levels. First, primary-educated Afro-Brazilians might fail to understand how affirmative action works, and believe that

Results for other demographic factors are mixed. Older Brazilians are significantly less supportive of affirmative action than are younger ones. Gender, however, does not significantly affect attitudes. And attitudes do vary significantly by region, but not quite in the way expected. Support for affirmative action is lower in the South than in the Southeast or Northeast, but not significantly so. However, support in all three regions is substantially lower than in the North and Center-West regions, representing the less populated, more isolated states surrounding the Amazon and the grasslands and wetlands known as the Pantanal.<sup>9</sup>

But perhaps the effects for educational level vary by the race of the respondent. After all,

university-educated whites are the ones most likely to lose out with affirmative action. University-educated blacks and mulattos should be much more likely to perceive that their family members or members of their social networks might benefit from affirmative action, though to the extent that such programs exclude higher status Afro-Brazilians they may still perceive a threat from affirmative action. High-school educated Afro-Brazilians, in contrast, are the group most likely to benefit from such programs. High-school educated whites may perceive that race-based quotas also threaten their chances for admission, even

this question presents them with the possibility of a guaranteed university slot. However, this alternative interpretation based on self-interest would not explain the very high support among whites with primary or lower educations. Second, response set is a possibility; low socioeconomic status Brazilians might simply be more likely to agree with all public opinion items. Cognitive interviewing is needed to understand further how Brazilians at the lowest educational levels interpret this question.

<sup>9</sup> When the North and Center-West are taken as the baseline category, it turns out that the South, Southeast, and Northeast all have significantly lower levels of support for affirmative action than do the omitted regions.

*These findings suggest that self-interest plays a very important role in affecting Brazilians' support for affirmative action.*

though they might benefit from non-racially oriented affirmative action programs.

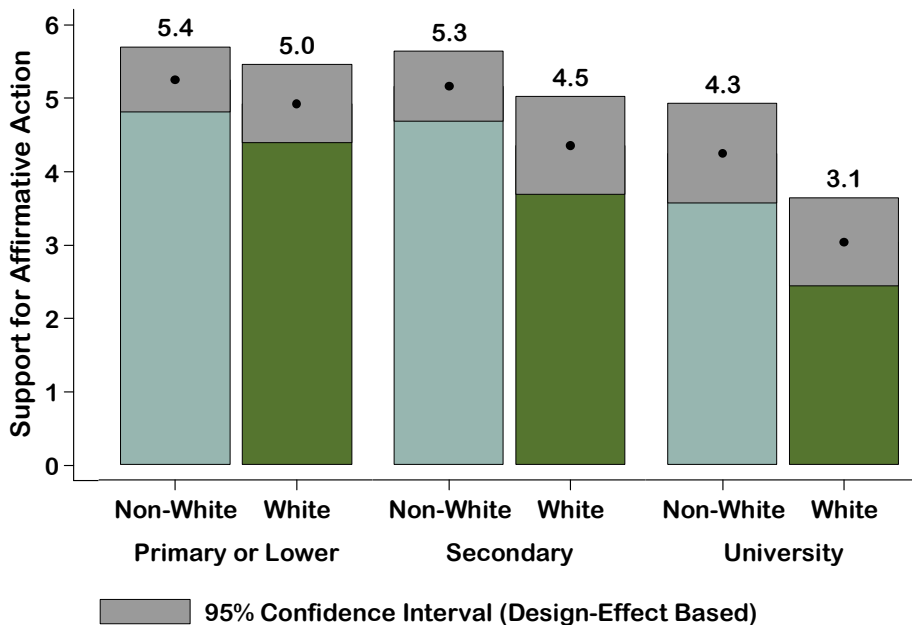
In Figure 3 I disaggregate support for affirmative action by educational level and race.<sup>10</sup> It turns out that among those with the lowest educational levels, there are essentially no racial differences in support for affirmative action. This supports the scholarship that has found little racial conflict among the lowest status Brazilians (Telles 2004). Among those with secondary education, however, a racial gap begins to open. And for the university-educated, this gap grows wide indeed. At the same time, I find that even for non-whites, a university education is associated with lower support for affirmative action. Whether this is due to self-interest, as speculated above, or to

highly educated Afro-Brazilians absorbing anti-affirmative attitudes within social milieus that are generally less supportive of the program remains a question for later investigation.

Surely, though, attitudes towards affirmative action must be driven by more than simply self-interest. Literature on attitudes towards affirmative action in the United States shows the importance of racism; moreover, even after taking racism into account, ideology and partisanship have independent effects (Kuklinski et al. 1997; Sniderman and Piazza 1993).

In a final linear regression model (results available upon request), I assessed the association between affirmative action attitudes, on the one hand, and racism, support for the ruling Workers' Party (PT) and for a welfare state, and self-location on either the left or the right, on the other. Two results were striking. First, after considerable analysis I was unable to find any standard political attitudes with much effect on support for affirmative action in Brazil, in marked contrast to what has been found in the U.S. *Even after removing demographic controls*, only support for a welfare state was significantly associated with a positive view toward affirmative action. Second, racism is clearly an important predictor of attitudes towards affirmative action, but its standardized effect is actually lower than that of several of the self-interest variables.<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 3. Average Support for Affirmative Action, by Race and Educational Level (weighted), 2010**



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

<sup>10</sup> In Appendix Table 1, I present results for a model in which I interact both educational variables with race. In this multivariate model, it becomes clear that the differences between whites and blacks are significant for both the high school- and college-educated.

<sup>11</sup> Measuring racism in any context is challenging. In this analysis I assess racism using agreement, again on a 7-point scale, with the statement that "The mixture of races is good for Brazil."

## Policy Implications

Brazil's profound racial inequalities are similar not only to those in the U.S., but also to those found in other countries with sizable Afro-descendant populations throughout the Americas. The Brazilian experience with affirmative action thus suggests possibilities for other states as well as for more concerted policy efforts by the Brazilian federal government. But what do Brazilians think about their country's experiment with racial quotas? Judging by media coverage, one might expect to find stark divisions among citizens. This *Insights* report thus presents surprising results. First, support for affirmative action is quite high across Brazil; over two-thirds of Brazilians place themselves at more supportive than neutral on a 7-point scale evaluating the fairness of racial quotas.

Second, there appear to be no political divisions between affirmative action proponents and detractors. *Petistas* (i.e., those who support the Workers' Party of President Lula) approve of affirmative action to no greater degree than do non-supporters of the PT. Likewise, there are no significant differences in support between leftists and rightists, or even between those who favor a welfare state and those who do not. This finding suggests a large potential coalition in favor of new affirmative action policies.

Still, these findings also point a finger at the limits of such a coalition. An important and powerful minority strongly opposes affirmative action; and the wealthiest and best-educated Brazilians are concentrated in this group. These are the citizens most able to write letters to the editor, to lobby their federal deputies, and to participate in marches. Thus, voices of powerful minority opponents may be louder than those of majoritarian supporters.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This might suggest to affirmative action's proponents that a plebiscite would be the best way to pass affirmative action legislation.

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## Appendix

Appendix Table 1. Ordinary Least Squares Model: The Interactive Effects of Race and Education on Support for Affirmative Action (Design Effect Adjusted)

	Coefficient	Standard Error
White	-0.143	0.174
Secondary Education	-0.194	0.176
University Education	-0.825**	0.285
Secondary X White	-0.501*	0.212
University X White	-0.940*	0.382
Age	-0.011**	0.004
Income	-0.131**	0.041
Female	-0.182	0.103
Northeast	0.303	0.286
Southeast	0.229	0.273
North & Center West	0.811**	0.246
Constant	5.930	0.254
<i>Number of Observations</i>	2156	
<i>R-squared</i>	0.0811	
<i>F</i>	14.63	

Note: Coefficients from weighted linear regression are significant at \*p < .05; \*\* p < .01.