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Public Perspectives on Affirmative Action in Education: Insights from SFFA v. Harvard and Contribusting Realities

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Abstract. This paper explores how the 2022–2023 Supreme Court hearings and ruling in Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard reshaped public attitudes toward affirmative action in higher education. Firstly, the legal analysis, media discourse analysis, and survey data will be provided to highlight the tensions between diversity goals and perceptions of meritocracy. Secondly, our team will present a comprehensive description of our data analysis to further investigate public perspectives on affirmative action in higher education and its implications. We collected 6,579 comments from six YouTube videos, utilizing MDCOR for analysis and conducting text analysis on the data. The results of the analysis categorized the comments into seven topics, each of the topic will be examined in depth.

Keywords: affirmative action, Supreme Court, higher education, race-conscious admissions, social media

1. Introduction

On October 31, 2022, the United States Supreme Court convened to hear oral arguments in Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College and its companion case, Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina [1]. These two lawsuits, both brought by the conservative advocacy group Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) led by Edward Blum, directly challenged the constitutionality of race-conscious admissions in American higher education. Legal commentators had long speculated that the Court's new conservative supermajority would use these cases to overturn decades of precedent on affirmative action [2] and the anticipation reached a fever pitch as the hearing date approached. On the day of the arguments, demonstrators gathered outside the Court—some carrying signs declaring "Defend Diversity" and others reading "End Racial Preferences." Inside the chamber, the justices probed both sides with pointed questions: conservative members pressed Harvard's and UNC's lawyers to explain when, if ever, race-conscious admissions should end, while liberal justices questioned SFFA's counsel about how race-neutral alternatives could achieve comparable diversity without exacerbating racial disparities.

Affirmative action in the United States has a long and contested history. Rooted in the civil rights reforms of the 1960s, it emerged as a deliberate policy response to centuries of racial discrimination and systemic exclusion. Initially, executive orders by Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson required federal contractors to "take affirmative action" to ensure equal opportunity in

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employment. The principle soon extended to higher education, aiming to correct entrenched racial imbalances in student representation and to open doors to institutions historically closed to underrepresented minorities. The goals were twofold: to remedy the enduring effects of past discrimination and to create diverse educational environments that could enrich learning outcomes for all students.

The legal architecture of affirmative action has been built and rebuilt through a series of landmark Supreme Court rulings. In Regents of the University of California v. Bakke [2], the Court struck down explicit racial quotas but allowed race to be considered as one factor among many in admissions decisions. This decision established the modern framework for race-conscious admissions, balancing constitutional limits with institutional goals for diversity. In Grutter v. Bollinger, the Court upheld the University of Michigan Law School's holistic admissions process, affirming that educational diversity constituted a "compelling governmental interest" under the Equal Protection Clause. Later cases, such as Fisher v. University of Texas [3], further clarified that race-conscious policies must be "narrowly tailored" and subject to strict scrutiny [3].

Despite its legal survival over decades, affirmative action has always existed in a politically charged environment. Supporters view it as a necessary tool to level the playing field, counteract structural inequities, and prepare students for a diverse society. Opponents argue that it amounts to reverse discrimination, undermining meritocracy and unfairly disadvantaging individuals from non-targeted groups. In recent years, demographic shifts, rising political polarization, and contentious debates over the role of identity in public life have intensified the controversy. Among the most vocal and visible participants in this debate have been Asian Americans, whose experiences and perspectives defy easy categorization. For some, affirmative action is perceived as a barrier to entry at elite institutions, given data suggesting disproportionately high academic thresholds for Asian applicants. For others, it remains a critical mechanism for addressing broader racial inequalities and supporting coalitions with other marginalized groups.

The October 2022 hearings in SFFA v. Harvard and SFFA v. UNC brought these tensions into sharp relief. SFFA argued that both universities discriminated against Asian American applicants by holding them to higher academic standards and by applying subjective "personal ratings" that depressed their admission chances. Harvard and UNC countered that race was never a decisive factor in their decisions but part of a holistic review process designed to cultivate diverse learning communities, in line with Supreme Court precedent. Throughout the arguments, justices returned repeatedly to two pivotal questions: could diversity's benefits be measured in a way that satisfied constitutional requirements, and at what point should race-conscious policies sunset? Media coverage zeroed in on these exchanges, with headlines such as "Justices Signal End for Affirmative Action" and "Diversity on Trial" appearing within hours.

Beyond the legal proceedings, the hearings catalyzed a surge of public discourse. National polls, such as those conducted by the Pew Research Center, showed that Americans were deeply split on the issue [4]. A majority opposed considering race in admissions, but opinions varied significantly by race, age, political affiliation, and education level. Among Asian Americans, the data revealed particularly complex attitudes: while 53% viewed affirmative action programs in general as a good thing, 76% opposed considering race as a factor in college admissions—a seeming contradiction that reflects the community's internal diversity and the tension between valuing diversity in principle and defending meritocratic selection in practice. In the days following the hearing, advocacy groups on both sides intensified their campaigns, with conservative organizations spotlighting stories of high-achieving Asian American students who were rejected from elite institutions, and progressive coalitions emphasizing the broader societal value of racially diverse campuses.

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When the Supreme Court issued its ruling on June 29, 2023, it struck down race-conscious admissions nationwide, effectively overruling Grutter v. Bollinger and reshaping the legal landscape of higher education. The majority opinion, authored by Chief Justice John Roberts, concluded that the policies failed strict scrutiny: their diversity goals were too vague, lacked measurable benchmarks, and risked reinforcing racial stereotypes. While applicants could still discuss how race had shaped their personal experiences in essays, admissions officers could no longer award benefits solely based on racial identity. The ruling was celebrated by opponents of affirmative action as a victory for "colorblind" equality but condemned by civil rights advocates as a step backward that would diminish opportunities for historically marginalized groups. In the weeks that followed, universities across the country convened emergency meetings to revise their admissions guidelines, advocacy organizations launched new legal challenges and policy initiatives, and editorial pages debated whether the decision marked the end of race-conscious equity measures in American public life.

By integrating legal analysis with sociopolitical context, this paper aims to illuminate how a single legal challenge not only altered the jurisprudence of affirmative action but also reshaped the national conversation about equity, opportunity, and the meaning of merit in American higher education.

2. Related literature

The sequence—from the charged atmosphere of the October 2022 oral arguments to the sweeping implications of the June 2023 decision—forms the central case study for this section. Using these events as a lens, the analysis proceeds in five parts:

1. Legal Background and Core Disputes – tracing the evolution of affirmative action policy and the constitutional arguments in SFFA v. Harvard and SFFA v. UNC.
2. Supreme Court Ruling and Its Implications – unpacking the majority and dissenting opinions, and the doctrinal shift away from Grutter v. Bollinger.
3. Asian Americans' Complex Attitudes – examining empirical data and the sociocultural factors behind divergent views within the community.
4. Media and Social Media Framing – comparing how traditional and digital platforms shaped public understanding and political mobilization.
5. Long-Term Policy Impact – considering how the dismantling of race-conscious admissions may influence workplace diversity, talent pipelines, and broader patterns of social mobility.

2.1. Litigation background and legal framework

2.1.1. Origins of the case and core allegations

The legal battle over Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard began in November 2014, when Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA)—a nonprofit organization founded by conservative legal strategist Edward Blum—filed suit against Harvard University in the U.S. District Court for the District of Massachusetts [1]. Blum, who had spent decades challenging race-conscious policies in both voting rights and education, positioned SFFA as a vehicle to overturn affirmative action in college admissions entirely [5].

SFFA's complaint rested on three primary allegations:

Systematic Disadvantage for Asian American Applicants – Harvard's internal admissions data, SFFA argued, revealed that Asian American applicants, despite earning higher average academic and

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extracurricular ratings than other racial groups, consistently received lower "personal ratings." [6]. These subjective ratings—covering traits such as "likability," "courage," and "kindness"—were highly influential in admissions decisions. SFFA alleged that this pattern amounted to intentional racial discrimination.

De Facto Racial Balancing – SFFA contended that Harvard's admitted classes displayed striking racial proportionality year after year, regardless of applicant pool variations [1]. They argued that this stability reflected a covert "soft quota" system designed to cap Asian American enrollment and maintain a preferred racial composition, in violation of Supreme Court precedent.

Violation of Federal Law – The lawsuit alleged that Harvard's admissions practices violated Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 [7], which prohibits racial discrimination in programs receiving federal funding. Since Harvard accepts federal student aid, it must comply with the same non-discrimination standards as public universities. The plaintiffs also invoked the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, arguing that Harvard's policy should be subject to strict scrutiny and would fail that standard [1].

Harvard categorically denied all allegations of unlawful conduct. It defended its holistic admissions process as a lawful, narrowly tailored means of cultivating a diverse student body, in which race was one factor among many [8]. Harvard argued that diversity constitutes a "compelling governmental interest" under Grutter v. Bollinger and that its policies did not set quotas or unlawfully disadvantage any group.

2.1.2. District court proceedings

The trial, held in 2018, featured testimony from statistical experts on both sides and extensive review of Harvard's internal documents [6,9]. SFFA's experts claimed that statistical analysis revealed a consistent penalty against Asian American applicants, particularly in personal ratings. Harvard's experts countered that the data, when viewed holistically, showed no unlawful discrimination and that admissions decisions considered a complex interplay of academic, extracurricular, and personal factors.

On October 1, 2019, U.S. District Judge Allison D. Burroughs ruled in Harvard's favor [8]. While acknowledging disparities in personal ratings, she concluded that SFFA had not proven these differences were due to racial bias. The court found no evidence of racial quotas or unlawful balancing and held that Harvard's diversity rationale was consistent with Grutter. Judge Burroughs emphasized that race-conscious admissions, when narrowly tailored and periodically reviewed, remain constitutional.

2.1.3. First circuit court of appeals

In November 2020, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit upheld the district court's decision [1]. The appellate court reaffirmed that Harvard's use of race fit within constitutional limits, was narrowly tailored, and served the compelling interest of diversity. It also rejected claims of unlawful racial balancing, noting that year-to-year stability in racial composition could be explained by other legitimate factors.

2.1.4. Supreme Court review and decision

In January 2022, the Supreme Court granted certiorari and consolidated the Harvard case with SFFA v. University of North Carolina [1,10]. Oral arguments on October 31, 2022, drew intense national

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attention. On June 29, 2023, the Court reversed the lower courts.

Chief Justice John Roberts, writing for the six-justice majority, held that Harvard's race-conscious admissions policy failed strict scrutiny. The majority found Harvard's diversity goals too vague, lacking measurable metrics; criticized the absence of a defined end point; warned of reinforcing racial stereotypes; and held that while applicants could discuss race in essays, admissions officers could not grant advantages solely on racial identity [1]. This decision overruled Grutter v. Bollinger and prohibited explicit race-based admissions nationwide.

2.2. Supreme Court ruling: majority, concurring, and dissenting opinions

The Supreme Court's June 29, 2023 ruling in Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard and SFFA v. University of North Carolina represents one of the most consequential shifts in higher education law in decades. The decision overturned Grutter v. Bollinger (2003) and effectively prohibited the explicit consideration of race in college admissions. The opinions—majority, concurring, and dissenting—together reveal deep philosophical divides about equality, merit, and the role of the Constitution in addressing racial disparities.

2.2.1. Majority opinion (Chief Justice John Roberts)

Chief Justice Roberts [1], writing for the six-justice conservative majority, held that Harvard's and UNC's race-conscious admissions policies failed the test of "strict scrutiny," the highest standard of judicial review applied to race-based classifications. The majority identified three core deficiencies in the universities' programs:

Lack of Measurable Objectives – Harvard and UNC's stated goals, such as "promoting cross-racial understanding" and "preparing students for a diverse society," were deemed too amorphous to permit judicial evaluation. Without concrete, measurable metrics, the Court could not assess whether the programs were narrowly tailored to achieve their aims.

No Logical End Point – Roberts emphasized that race-conscious admissions must have a defined termination point, as suggested in Grutter. Yet neither Harvard nor UNC articulated a clear timeline or conditions under which their programs would end. This open-endedness, according to the majority, risked perpetuating race-based distinctions indefinitely.

Risk of Stereotyping – The majority warned that linking certain qualities or perspectives to racial identity risks reinforcing stereotypes. For example, assuming that an applicant will bring a "unique viewpoint" solely because of their race undermines the principle of individual assessment.

Roberts reiterated his oft-stated belief in the principle that "eliminating racial discrimination means eliminating all of it." While the decision did not prohibit applicants from discussing race in application essays—especially as it relates to their personal experiences—it prohibited admissions officers from awarding benefits solely based on racial identity. This marked a doctrinal shift from group-based diversity benefits toward individualized narratives.

The majority opinion invoked Brown v. Board of Education [11] as a moral touchstone, suggesting that the Equal Protection Clause mandates a "colorblind" approach in government action, including public education. Roberts framed the ruling as restoring constitutional fidelity rather than dismantling civil rights progress.

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2.2.2. Concurring opinion (Justice Clarence Thomas)

Justice Thomas, a long-standing critic of affirmative action, wrote a separate concurrence expanding on the philosophical foundations of the majority's reasoning. He argued that the Constitution is "colorblind" by design and that any racial classification—regardless of intent—undermines the principle of equal protection.

Thomas rejected the idea that diversity constitutes a compelling interest, asserting that the educational benefits claimed by universities are speculative and unmeasurable. He further argued that race-conscious policies perpetuate dependency and stigma, sending the message that minority students cannot succeed without preferential treatment.

Drawing from his own life story, Thomas noted that he had benefited from attending Yale Law School but later felt his degree was tainted by assumptions that he was admitted under affirmative action. He warned that such policies can inadvertently harm their intended beneficiaries by casting doubt on their achievements.

2.2.3. Dissenting opinion (Justice Sonia Sotomayor)

Justice Sotomayor authored a forceful dissent in the Harvard case, accusing the majority of imposing a "superficial rule of colorblindness in an endemically segregated society." She argued that the decision ignores the enduring reality of structural racism and undermines the Constitution's ability to address persistent inequalities.

Sotomayor traced the history of race-conscious remedies from Brown through Grutter, emphasizing that the Court has long recognized the necessity of considering race to dismantle entrenched disparities. She cited empirical evidence showing that race-neutral alternatives fail to produce comparable diversity, particularly at highly selective institutions.

For Sotomayor, the Equal Protection Clause is not a mandate for racial neutrality in all contexts but a tool to achieve substantive equality. Ignoring race, she warned, does not erase its impact on educational opportunity.

2.2.4. Dissenting opinion (Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson)

Justice Jackson, recused from the Harvard case due to her prior service on its Board of Overseers, joined Sotomayor's dissent in the UNC case and wrote separately to underscore the practical consequences of the majority's reasoning.

She presented a hypothetical comparison between two applicants from North Carolina: one white student from an affluent, multi-generationally privileged background, and one Black student whose ancestors were enslaved and who attended underfunded public schools. Treating these applicants identically, Jackson argued, ignores the historical and social context that shapes their achievements.

Jackson accused the majority of "let-them-eat-cake obliviousness," warning that formal equality without regard to context perpetuates rather than alleviates inequality. She concluded that the Court's decision will deepen racial disparities in higher education and, by extension, in professional and civic life.

2.2.5. Implications of the Court's philosophical divide

The stark contrast between the majority and dissenting opinions reflects a fundamental disagreement over the meaning of equality. The majority embraces a formal equality model—equal treatment

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under the law without regard to race—while the dissenters advocate for substantive equality, which acknowledges historical disadvantage and seeks to correct it through targeted measures.

Legal scholars have noted that this decision not only overturns Grutter but also signals a broader skepticism toward race-conscious policies in other domains, including employment and government contracting. The ruling's emphasis on measurable goals, sunset provisions, and individualized assessments may influence how lower courts evaluate other affirmative action programs.

2.3. Asian Americans' complex attitudes toward affirmative action

Asian Americans' relationship with affirmative action is one of the most misunderstood and oversimplified narratives in the broader U.S. debate on race-conscious admissions. Too often, public discourse paints the community as a unified bloc staunchly opposed to such policies, largely because of high-profile lawsuits like Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard where Asian Americans were positioned as the plaintiffs' central victims. However, empirical evidence and qualitative accounts reveal a much more complex, often contradictory, set of attitudes shaped by political affiliation, generational differences, cultural values, and varied immigration histories.

2.3.1. Pew research data: support for diversity, skepticism toward race-based criteria

The Pew Research Center's 2023 survey provides one of the clearest empirical snapshots of Asian American public opinion on affirmative action. The findings reveal a striking paradox: [4].

- 53% of Asian American adults say affirmative action programs in general are a good thing.
- 19% consider them a bad thing.
- 27% are unsure or have no opinion.

This level of general support for diversity initiatives mirrors that of the general U.S. population and indicates that many Asian Americans recognize the value of policies designed to expand opportunity and correct historical inequities.

However, when the question becomes more specific—whether race should be considered in college admissions—support collapses: 76% of Asian Americans oppose the practice. This includes:

- 90% opposition among Asian American Republicans [4].
- 69% opposition among Asian American Democrats.

The fact that a majority of Democrats within the community also oppose race-conscious admissions illustrates that skepticism is not confined to conservative ideology. Rather, it appears rooted in shared experiences and cultural narratives around fairness, meritocracy, and academic competition.

The disconnect between abstract approval of affirmative action and concrete opposition to race-based admissions reveals a deeper tension: many Asian Americans may embrace diversity as a societal good while simultaneously rejecting mechanisms they perceive as undermining individual merit.

2.3.2. Political affiliation and immigration background

Political identity plays an important role in shaping views, but it interacts strongly with immigration status and generational cohort.

- Immigrant Asian Americans tend to be the most skeptical of race-conscious admissions. This skepticism often stems from experiences in their countries of origin, where high-stakes, exam-based admissions systems dominate. For families from China, South Korea, or India, academic

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achievement is deeply embedded in the cultural understanding of how to advance socially and economically. The idea that non-academic factors—especially race—could influence admissions outcomes can be perceived as both alien and unfair.

• U.S.-born Asian Americans, while still showing majority opposition to considering race, tend to be more open to the idea. Having grown up within American educational institutions, they are more likely to have encountered discussions about structural racism, equity, and the rationale for diversity programs.

Political leanings often magnify these tendencies. Republican-identifying Asian Americans typically frame their opposition in terms of "reverse discrimination" and "colorblind equality," while Democrats may focus more on reforming holistic review to ensure fairness without eliminating diversity altogether.

2.3.3. The meritocracy–holistic review tension

A central fault line within Asian American perspectives on affirmative action is the perceived clash between "admit those who test best" and the American model of holistic review.

Holistic review allows universities to consider a wide range of factors—academic performance, extracurricular involvement, personal essays, recommendations, and, historically, race or ethnicity. While this approach aims to capture an applicant's potential beyond test scores, it also introduces subjectivity.

In the Harvard case, SFFA's legal strategy capitalized on this tension. Harvard's internal data showed that Asian American applicants often scored highest on academic and extracurricular metrics but received lower personal ratings on traits such as leadership, courage, and likability. Because these ratings significantly influenced admissions decisions, the data fed perceptions that subjective criteria were being used to suppress Asian American admissions rates in favor of maintaining racial balance.

For immigrant families who have invested heavily in tutoring, exam preparation, and extracurricular "résumé-building," the notion that these achievements could be outweighed by intangible personality assessments strikes at the heart of their understanding of fairness. Stories—often widely shared in ethnic media—about Asian American students with near-perfect academic credentials being rejected from elite universities reinforce the belief that the system is rigged against them.

However, there is a counter-narrative within the community. Some Asian Americans, particularly those with experience in the liberal arts model or progressive activism, argue that test scores alone cannot capture qualities essential to success in diverse, collaborative environments. For them, holistic review is a safeguard against reducing education to a numbers game, and race-conscious policies are a necessary component of that review to ensure underrepresented groups are not excluded by structural inequities.

2.3.4. Media framing and the victim narrative

The way media outlets frame Asian Americans in the affirmative action debate has profoundly shaped public perceptions—both inside and outside the community.

• Conservative advocacy groups have strategically highlighted Asian Americans as victims of "reverse discrimination," using their high average academic performance as evidence that race-conscious policies unfairly penalize them.

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• Progressive organizations have emphasized the socioeconomic and ethnic diversity within the Asian American umbrella, noting that Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander subgroups often face educational barriers similar to those of Black and Hispanic communities, and thus stand to benefit from affirmative action.

This dichotomy has created an internal communications challenge: many Asian Americans feel their voices are being used as political tools rather than accurately represented.

2.3.5. Implications of internal division

The coexistence of broad support for diversity initiatives with strong opposition to race-conscious admissions criteria produces a fractured political landscape. This has several implications:

Advocacy Fragmentation – Both opponents and supporters of affirmative action can find "Asian American" voices to bolster their positions, making the community a contested symbolic resource in national debates.

Inter-minority Tensions – Framing affirmative action as a zero-sum competition between Asian Americans and other minority groups risks fueling mistrust and undermining solidarity in broader civil rights coalitions.

Policy Blind Spots – Policymakers who assume a monolithic Asian American stance—whether pro- or anti-affirmative action—risk overlooking the needs of subgroups who may be marginalized in both public discourse and institutional practice.

2.3.6. A path forward: beyond binary narratives

To move the conversation beyond polarized framing, it is essential to recognize the heterogeneity of Asian American experiences. This means:

Disaggregating Data – Breaking down statistics by ethnic subgroup, immigration generation, and socioeconomic status to reveal who benefits or loses under different admissions models.

Engaging in Intra-community Dialogue – Creating spaces for Asian Americans of different backgrounds to discuss the trade-offs between diversity and meritocracy without being reduced to talking points for external political agendas.

Exploring Race-neutral Equity Measures – For example, adversity indices that consider income, neighborhood resources, and school quality could address structural inequities without explicitly using race, potentially bridging divides within the community.

Ultimately, the Asian American case study underscores that public opinion on affirmative action cannot be captured by a single poll number or lawsuit. It is a dynamic, contested terrain where personal history, cultural values, and political identity intersect—often producing conclusions that are internally conflicted yet deeply felt.

2.4. Media framing: social media vs. news media

The October 31, 2022 Supreme Court hearings provided a rare, concentrated moment in which both traditional and social media devoted extensive coverage to affirmative action in higher education. The contrast between these two media ecosystems revealed how the framing of an issue can differ dramatically depending on platform dynamics, editorial practices, and audience segmentation.

1. Tone and Emotional Register – On social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok, discussion volume spiked during the week of the hearings. Hashtags such as #AffirmativeAction, #Harvard, and #AsianAmericans trended nationally. Posts often adopted an emotionally charged

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tone, with one side declaring the hearings as "the beginning of the end" for "racial discrimination" in admissions, while the other warned of an imminent "rollback of civil rights." The brevity and virality of these posts tended to amplify extreme positions, privileging outrage, succinct slogans, and personal storytelling over nuanced legal explanation [12].

2. Contextual Depth – In contrast, traditional news outlets such as The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Wall Street Journal generally offered more context and legal background. Their reports summarized the oral arguments, analyzed the questions posed by justices, and situated them within the broader history of affirmative action jurisprudence. These outlets also tended to balance sources, quoting university officials, plaintiffs, legal scholars, and affected students from multiple racial backgrounds.

3. Representation of Asian Americans – Pan et al. [12] highlight that social media frequently amplified the narrative of Asian Americans as the primary victims of affirmative action, often focusing on individual stories of rejection from elite universities. This framing was particularly prominent in right-leaning online spaces, where it became a rallying point against race-conscious admissions. By contrast, traditional media portrayed Asian Americans in a more multifaceted way—featuring both opponents and supporters of affirmative action, and covering the internal diversity of views within the community. Some stories spotlighted underrepresented Asian subgroups (such as Hmong, Cambodian, and Pacific Islander students) who could benefit from affirmative action, complicating the "model minority" victim narrative.

4. Echo Chambers and Algorithmic Influence – Social media's algorithmic amplification mechanisms tended to push users toward content that reinforced their existing beliefs. This created echo chambers in which audiences consumed highly curated, ideologically aligned interpretations of the hearings. For example, in left-leaning circles, posts emphasized systemic racism and the risk of re-segregation in education; in right-leaning spaces, the dominant narrative centered on fairness, meritocracy, and the alleged disadvantages faced by Asian American applicants. Pan et al. note that these algorithm-driven bubbles not only mirrored but intensified preexisting political polarization.

5. Media Ideological Differences on Race – On racially sensitive topics, the gap between left- and right-leaning media outlets became especially pronounced. Progressive outlets stressed historical inequities and the necessity of diversity programs, while conservative outlets emphasized individual merit and constitutional colorblindness. These divergent frames shaped how different audiences interpreted the same legal event—either as a step toward fairness or as a retreat from social justice.

6. Implications for Public Understanding and Policy Reaction – The structural differences in how information is presented across media types have significant downstream effects. Social media's immediacy and emotional pull can rapidly mobilize supporters and opponents, influencing grassroots activism and shaping the tone of public debate. Traditional media's slower, more analytical approach informs policymakers, institutional leaders, and legal professionals who require a more complete understanding of the legal and historical context.

This divergence in media framing does not merely shape immediate perceptions of legal decisions; it actively influences how policymakers, educational institutions, and advocacy groups calibrate their strategies in the months and years that follow. In the wake of the 2023 Supreme Court ruling, these differentiated media narratives became part of the feedback loop that shaped legislative proposals, university policy revisions, and even the contours of subsequent litigation over diversity, equity, and inclusion programs.

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2.5. Implications for workplace diversity (expanded with personal perspective)

The media polarization described in Section V did not merely shape public perceptions—it directly influenced institutional responses to the Supreme Court's decision and will continue to impact the composition of the American workforce for decades to come. The end of race-conscious admissions marks a profound structural shift, one whose effects will ripple far beyond university campuses.

2.5.1. The education-to-workforce pipeline effect

Elite universities serve as powerful gateways to leadership in virtually every sector of American society, from law and finance to public service, science, and the arts. The graduates of these institutions disproportionately populate the upper echelons of government, Fortune 500 companies, top law firms, and leading hospitals. A contraction in racial diversity within these universities therefore poses a long-term risk to diversity at the leadership level.

The "pipeline effect" is neither immediate nor uniform—it unfolds over years as successive graduating classes enter the workforce. Historical data from states that banned affirmative action (e.g., California after Proposition 209 in 1996) indicate declines in Black and Hispanic enrollment at flagship campuses, followed by reduced representation in certain professional sectors. If similar patterns emerge nationwide, the demographic composition of the leadership class could gradually skew away from reflecting America's broader diversity.

2.5.2. Corporate DEI strategies under pressure

Corporations, particularly in competitive industries such as technology, finance, and consulting, have long relied on selective universities as a primary recruitment channel. The ruling compels companies to reconsider how they source talent. If elite institutions produce less racially diverse graduating classes, firms may need to expand recruitment to a wider range of institutions, including regional public universities and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

However, this adaptation is not without challenges. Employers often rely on institutional brand as a proxy for candidate quality. Expanding recruitment beyond traditional targets requires building new evaluation systems, rethinking internship pipelines, and potentially investing in longer-term employee development. Moreover, companies may face political and legal scrutiny of their DEI programs, particularly in states where legislators are targeting corporate diversity initiatives as "reverse discrimination."

2.5.3. Risks to innovation and organizational competitiveness

Diversity is not merely a moral imperative; it is also a proven driver of innovation. Studies across industries show that heterogeneous teams outperform homogenous ones in problem-solving, creativity, and adaptability. Reducing diversity in educational feeder systems risks weakening this advantage. In sectors like technology, biomedical research, and creative industries—where complex problem-solving is essential—loss of diverse perspectives can diminish competitive edge.

Furthermore, in an increasingly globalized economy, companies must navigate cross-cultural markets. Employees who have been educated in diverse environments are often better equipped to engage with international clients, adapt to cultural nuances, and anticipate the needs of diverse consumer bases. If classroom diversity declines, so too may the cultural competency of future leaders.

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2.5.4. Challenges for the arts and cultural sectors

Although the arts are often perceived as more meritocratic or insulated from policy changes in higher education, they are deeply intertwined with educational diversity. As a senior cello performance major at the Manhattan School of Music, I have witnessed the profound creative synergy that emerges when musicians from vastly different backgrounds collaborate. A Brazilian percussionist may interpret rhythm with a distinct cultural cadence, while a Korean violinist brings phrasing influenced by both Western conservatory training and traditional music heritage.

Such diversity enriches artistic output, fosters empathy, and broadens audience appeal. If elite music conservatories—many of which already have limited seats—become less racially diverse due to changes in admissions policy, the loss will not only be numerical but also artistic. Chamber ensembles, orchestras, and arts institutions may find their creative range narrowing, which could impact the vitality and relevance of cultural production in a pluralistic society.

2.5.5. The "bamboo ceiling" paradox

For Asian Americans, the ruling presents a paradox. On the one hand, removing race-conscious admissions may reduce perceived barriers for high-achieving Asian applicants to enter elite institutions. On the other hand, dismantling diversity programs can weaken institutional mechanisms that address subtle workplace biases, thereby entrenching the so-called "bamboo ceiling"—the invisible barrier that limits Asian Americans' advancement into executive roles.

Leadership selection in corporate America often depends on subjective qualities such as "executive presence," "cultural fit," and networking ability—criteria that can inadvertently favor candidates from majority backgrounds. Without intentional diversity initiatives, these biases may remain unchecked, limiting upward mobility for minority professionals, including Asian Americans.

2.5.6. Personal reflection: diversity as a catalyst for growth

From my perspective as a conservatory student, diversity is not an abstract metric—it is the foundation of my artistic and personal growth. In rehearsals, I have learned as much from my peers' cultural stories as from my instructors' technical guidance. Exposure to diverse perspectives has challenged my assumptions, expanded my interpretive palette, and deepened my understanding of music as a living, evolving conversation among cultures.

If diversity diminishes in classrooms, the loss will be felt not only in demographic statistics but also in the subtle, intangible ways that students learn to think, create, and empathize. This is why the challenge post–affirmative action is not simply about numbers—it is about preserving the conditions that make transformative education possible.

2.5.7. Policy and institutional responses moving forward

The path forward will require creativity and political will. Educational institutions can pivot toward race-neutral alternatives that still foster diversity, such as:

- Socioeconomic-based admissions that prioritize applicants from low-income or first-generation backgrounds.
- Geographic diversity policies targeting underrepresented rural and urban school districts.
- Holistic adversity indexes that quantify challenges like poverty, disability, or linguistic barriers.
- Targeted scholarships and outreach for underrepresented communities, without explicit racial criteria.

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In the corporate world, proactive partnerships between employers and a wider range of educational institutions could help sustain diverse pipelines. Mentorship programs, paid internships, and leadership development initiatives can ensure that diverse talent not only enters but also advances within organizations.

The Supreme Court's ruling has closed one chapter in the history of affirmative action, but it has opened another in the national conversation about equity. Whether the next phase will preserve the benefits of diversity—or allow them to erode—will depend on the willingness of both educators and employers to innovate within the constraints of the new legal landscape.

2.6. Post-decision policy reactions

The Supreme Court's June 29, 2023 decision in Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard and SFFA v. UNC did not conclude the affirmative action debate; rather, it redirected it into new political, legal, and institutional arenas. The ruling's prohibition on explicit race-conscious admissions prompted immediate and divergent responses from state governments, universities, federal agencies, advocacy groups, and the broader public. These reactions reveal that while the legal question may have been settled—for now—the political and policy battles over diversity in higher education and beyond remain far from over.

2.6.1. State-level divergence: red and blue states chart opposite courses

In the weeks following the decision, Republican-led states moved quickly to extend the ruling's logic to other domains, particularly corporate and public-sector DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) programs. Attorneys general from states such as Texas, Florida, and Missouri sent formal letters to Fortune 500 companies, warning that race-conscious hiring, contracting, or fellowship programs could now be viewed as illegal "reverse discrimination." Some state legislatures introduced bills to defund public university DEI offices, arguing that taxpayer money should not be used to promote race-based initiatives.

In contrast, Democratic-led states, including California, New York, and Illinois, publicly reaffirmed their commitment to diversity. Attorneys general from these states issued joint statements pledging to explore "race-neutral" methods to maintain representation in higher education. Some governors ordered task forces to design new admissions criteria—such as socioeconomic disadvantage indexes or zip code-based recruitment—to achieve diversity without directly considering race. California's experience after Proposition 209 served as both a cautionary tale and a source of policy innovation, guiding states toward more holistic, multi-factor evaluation systems.

2.6.2. Institutional adjustments in higher education

Universities—particularly elite private institutions—were among the first to act. Admissions offices convened emergency committees to audit their policies and rewrite internal guidelines. Several universities, including Harvard, MIT, and Stanford, began emphasizing essays that allow applicants to describe personal experiences with adversity, cultural identity, or community engagement. These prompts aim to comply with the Court's instruction that race may be discussed in an applicant's narrative but not used as a standalone admissions criterion.

However, early enrollment data from the 2024–2025 admissions cycle suggest significant demographic shifts. According to preliminary reports, Black and Hispanic representation has declined at several highly selective institutions, though the magnitude varies. In some cases, Asian

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American enrollment has increased modestly, while white enrollment has remained stable or risen slightly. Notably, changes in the proportion of Asian American admits have been uneven—at certain universities, the percentage remained constant or even decreased slightly, suggesting that other factors, such as increased competition and expanded outreach, are influencing outcomes.

Public universities in states that had already banned affirmative action before the 2023 ruling, such as Michigan and Washington, reported less dramatic shifts, as they had long relied on race-neutral approaches. Nonetheless, these institutions are closely monitoring their pipelines to ensure continued diversity in applicant pools.

2.6.3. Federal oversight and compliance measures

At the federal level, the political context shifted sharply in 2025 under the Trump administration's second term. The Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights issued new compliance directives requiring universities to certify that race played no role in admissions decisions [13]. Institutions must now submit anonymized admissions data for audit, including information on essays, interview notes, and recommendation letters, to verify that racial identity was not used as a proxy for preferential treatment.

Failure to comply with these standards could result in the loss of federal student aid eligibility, creating a powerful enforcement mechanism. Critics argue that these measures create a chilling effect, discouraging even lawful consideration of diversity-related experiences for fear of triggering investigations. Supporters contend that such oversight is necessary to ensure genuine colorblindness in admissions.

2.6.4. Ongoing and emerging litigation

The Court's ruling has also opened new legal battlegrounds. Advocacy groups have filed lawsuits against universities alleging that "holistic review" still operates as a de facto racial preference. The University of California system and Cornell University have both faced legal challenges claiming that criteria such as "overcoming adversity" or "demonstrated commitment to community diversity" serve as disguised racial factors.

Meanwhile, civil rights organizations have launched counter-litigation against states and employers that dismantled DEI programs, arguing that these rollbacks violate Title VII of the Civil Rights Act by fostering hostile environments or perpetuating inequities. The legal terrain is thus becoming even more fragmented, with courts across the country issuing inconsistent rulings on what constitutes permissible diversity initiatives under the new regime.

2.6.5. Public opinion and political mobilization

Public reaction to the decision has remained sharply polarized. Polls taken immediately after the ruling showed a narrow majority of Americans approving of the outcome, with strong support among Republicans and significant opposition among Democrats. Among Asian Americans—the group most prominently featured in the SFFA litigation—responses were mixed, reflecting the complex attitudes discussed in Section IV.

Advocacy groups have used the decision to galvanize their respective bases. Conservative organizations have launched nationwide campaigns to "end all race-based preferences," targeting everything from government contracting to corporate leadership programs. Progressive coalitions,

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on the other hand, have doubled down on defending diversity initiatives, framing the ruling as part of a broader rollback of civil rights protections.

Social media continues to play a decisive role in shaping perceptions. Hashtags such as #EndRacialPreferences and #DefendDiversity trend periodically, often in response to news of new lawsuits or policy changes. The same algorithmic dynamics described in Section V continue to amplify polarized narratives, ensuring that public opinion remains divided along ideological lines.

2.6.6. Anticipated long-term consequences

Looking ahead, the impact of the decision will likely be cumulative rather than immediate. The first cohorts of students admitted under the post-affirmative action regime will graduate in the late 2020s, at which point employers, graduate schools, and professional organizations will begin to feel the effects of altered educational demographics.

In fields such as medicine and law, where professional school admissions are highly competitive and closely tied to elite undergraduate pipelines, the diversity of future practitioners may be significantly affected. This, in turn, could influence service delivery in underserved communities, potentially exacerbating disparities in areas such as healthcare access and legal representation.

For policymakers, the central question will be whether race-neutral diversity initiatives can preserve enough representation to avoid these downstream effects—or whether additional interventions will be required. Lessons from states like California suggest that maintaining diversity without explicit racial consideration is possible but demands sustained investment in outreach, financial aid, and academic support.

2.6.7. The policy crossroads

The post-decision era presents a policy crossroads. One path—favored by many conservative lawmakers—aims for strict race neutrality across all sectors, interpreting the ruling as a mandate to eliminate identity-based considerations entirely. The other path—pursued by progressive states and institutions—seeks to adapt diversity goals to the constraints of the Court's decision, using proxies such as socioeconomic status, geography, and life experiences.

The long-term outcome will depend on which approach gains more traction, both politically and culturally. In a polarized America, it is plausible that higher education and workplace diversity policies will continue to diverge sharply between red and blue states, creating parallel systems with different opportunities and outcomes for students and workers.

3. Data analysis

To gain a better understanding of public perspectives on affirmative action in higher education and its related implications, we conducted a data analysis of comments from six YouTube videos discussing SFFA v. Harvard. In this section, we will first outline the process of our data analysis, followed by the conclusions and insights derived from the analysis. The perspectives expressed by users can be categorized into seven distinct topics, which will be explained in detail.

3.1. Research process

The data was collected from six YouTube videos. The first video, titled "Harvard students 'devastated' after Supreme Court affirmative action ruling" (referred to as Video 1), was published by user MSNBC and received 1k likes and 3,118 comments. The second video, "Affirmative Action

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Debate Rages In Era Of Donald Trump | The Beat With Ari Melber" (Video 2), also published by MSNBC, garnered 196 likes and 102 comments. The third video, "See GOP justices debunked: 'Diversity is discrimination' claim drives new Affirmative Action ban" (Video 3), provided by MSNBC, gained 4.3k likes and 2,011 comments. Video 4, titled "Supreme Court rules race cannot be factor in college admission", published by Fox News, received 1.6k likes and 1,085 comments. The fifth video (Video 5) "AOC called out for 'extreme' reaction to SCOTUS' affirmative action ruling", created by Fox News, accumulated 5.4k likes and 2,661 comments. The final video, titled "Stephen A. Smith goes off on SCOTUS's affirmative action ruling" (Video 6), was published by Fox News and received 2.9k likes and 2,175 comments. All of the videos mentioned above were published on YouTube in 2023, shortly after the SFFA v. Harvard case reached its final stage, and all the content is focused on this topic. The comments on these six videos predominantly address opinions on affirmative action in the context of SFFA v. Harvard. In total, we collected 6,579 comments. The data analysis was primarily conducted using the MDCOR app, which was chosen because it is specifically designed for open-ended questions, making it effective for analyzing video comments.

Table 1. Links of six YouTube videos

Video 1	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56T4XKFYgNE
Video 2	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsmEz0clCYU&t=211s
Video 3	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJ9qVkBV21A
Video 4	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwivZI46e74
Video 5	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsadG-lTXsk
Video 6	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkwj9YKJHhA

After gathering the data, text mining is required. This step is crucial as it allows for the identification of critical data from a vast amount of data. Unstructured data, such as text and visual information, needs to be converted into matrix form to facilitate equation building through Natural Language Processing (NLP). Structuring the data involves several steps, including text encoding, managing sparsity, and creating a Document Term Matrix (DTM). The second step of MDCOR will assist in completing these tasks. The text mining results yielded 6,440 documents and 987 terms. 139 responses were excluded due to irrelevance, such as "Hahahahaha", "Oh noooooo" and so on. The results highlight the 20 most frequent words, which can be trimmed if necessary. However, we chose not to trim any words, as the most frequent term "people" appeared 1,148 times, still significantly lower than the total number of documents (Figure 1).

Following this, the metrics need to be executed to determine the optimal number of codes. To identify the most appropriate number, ideally, the DTM for different topics should not overlap, ensuring that each topic is distinct. However, this is impractical, so the dyadic analysis is needed. As illustrated by González Canché [14], two metrics may be sufficient to determine the appropriate number of codes. MDCOR will help execute four metrics, and we primarily concentrated on correlation and dissimilarity. Therefore, according to the research by Cao et al. [15] and Deveaud et al. [16], we find the point where correlation is close to 0 and dissimilarity is close to 1, leading us to conclude that the optimal number of codes is seven (Figure 2).

After selecting the optimal number of codes for the MDCOR engine, we obtained an LDAvis model (Figure 3). This model presents the top 30 most frequent words for each code using an interactive descriptive tool and also highlights the distinctions and commonalities in the fundamental meanings of these codes [14]. The seven codes are distinctly separated, indicating that

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each topic is representative and unique. By selecting each circle, the terms associated with each topic can be reviewed (Figures 4-10). In addition to the LDAvis model, the MDCOR also highlights the most representative cases. We selected 20 documents for each code to further define seven topics.

Furthermore, to facilitate a comparison of seven different topics, we perform a group analysis of six YouTube videos to identify the specific focus of each video. The relationships among these topics are illustrated in Figure 9, while Figure 10 highlights the primary emphasis of each video. In Figure 9 each point represents a distinct code, and the lines connecting them indicate the shared relationships between pairs of codes.

```
 [1] "Response(s) dropped, ID: 51 @teoplaton1100 Text: Salom"
 [2] "Response(s) dropped, ID: 76 @JY-bw2qz Text: Cope and Seethe"
 [3] "Response(s) dropped, ID: 83 @defencebangladesh4068 Text: Why"
 [4] "Response(s) dropped, ID: 188 @lamburdzy Text: Hahahahaha"
 [5] "Response(s) dropped, ID: 286 @mrich9654 Text: Sack up you whiners"
 [6] "Response(s) dropped, ID: 291 @josehawking5293 Text: What experts"
 [7] "Response(s) dropped, ID: 410 @plronson Text: Enter zip codes"
 [8] "Response(s) dropped, ID: 488 @girnucci Text: Devastation  Collusion Defund"
 [9] "Response(s) dropped, ID: 513 @user-vu7xj6xu8r Text: MSDNC"
[10] "Response(s) dropped, ID: 523 @dmitryponomarev3052 Text: HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHHAHAHAHA"
        words freq
1      people 1148
2         get 1107
3       white 1004
4       black  858
5      action  839
6        much  808
7  affirmative  780
8        good  757
9       court  749
10        aoc  708
11       race  708
12       need  663
13       just  609
14        can  592
15       like  588
16    student  584
17    college  537
18      asian  535
19    supreme  511
20     racist  509
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Figure 1. Texts mining results

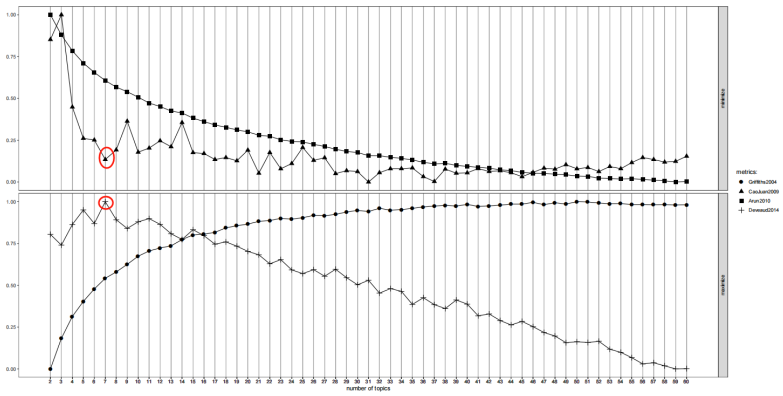

Figure 2. Metrics plot

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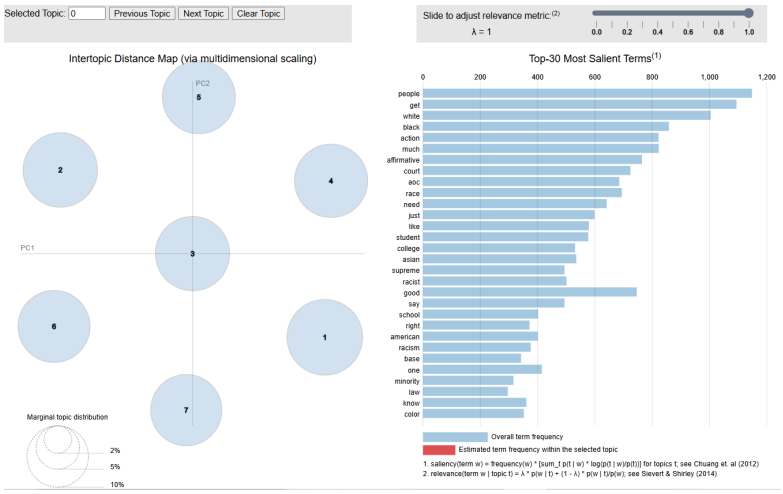

Figure 3. LDAvis model

In summary, this section outlines the process of our data analysis, which includes data collection, text mining, metrics assessment, the execution of MDCOR, and group comparisons. As a result of the machine driven classification of open-ended responses, we identified seven codes from all comments across six YouTube videos. Additionally, we obtained the top 30 most frequently used words and the top 20 most representative cases for each code, which will be utilized to define seven topics in the following section.

3.2. Insights from data analysis

To further research public perspectives on affirmative action in education through SFFA v. Harvard case, this section will define seven topics from the result shown above. Seven topics will be analyzing separately, we will conclude the essential content of the topic, analyze the most frequent words and contributing realities. To further investigate public perspectives on affirmative action in education in light of the SFFA v. Harvard case, this section will define seven topics based on the results presented above. Each topic will be analyzed individually, allowing us to present the most frequently used words, summarize the key content, and explore the contributing factors associated with each topic.

Topic 1 accounts for approximately 15.1% of the overall content and primarily focuses on the transition, as indicated by the most frequently used words and the most representative cases. Terms such as “time,” “year,” and “past” reflect the fluidity of time, while verbs like “make” and “cause” highlight individuals' subjective engagement with social issues. Therefore, this topic concentrate on the development of civil rights and equality. Situated within the theme of affirmative action, it has undergone several historical changes since President John F. Kennedy issued Executive Order 10925 in 1961 [17]. Following this, affirmative action has experienced various developments, including the introduction of the strict scrutiny standard. The two-tier test was first established in Adarand Constructors v. Peña [18], the first tier required any justification for using racial preferences to be highly convincing, while the second tier emphasized the importance of compelling state interest. The development of affirmative action has taken a considerable amount of time and has been shaped by several key cases. For instance, regarding compelling state interest, Sukin highlights relevant cases such as Korematsu v. United States, 323 U.S. 214 (1944), and United States v. Paradise, 480 U.S. 149 (1987). Creating legislation is never straightforward, and all developments are grounded in practical application. Laws must evolve in response to reality, as that is their primary purpose.

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Affirmative action has experienced both rises and falls, with the Supreme Court's stance shifting from enthusiasm to hostility over time [19]. In the 1990s, for instance, several states began to prohibit the use of affirmative action through ballot initiatives or executive orders, starting with California, Florida, and Washington [20]. Today, with the emergence of the SFFA v. Harvard case, new challenges for affirmative action have arisen, prompting calls for further development.

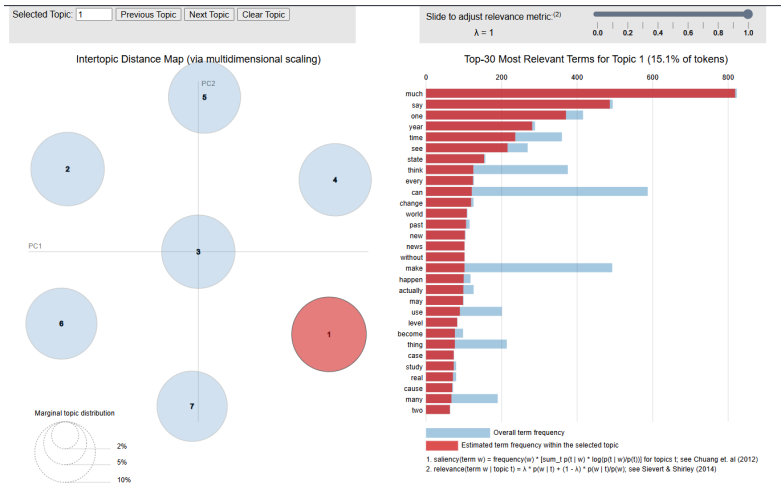

Figure 4. Key terms associated with topic 1

Topic 2 represents about 14.7% of the total content, primarily addresses the conflict between merit and equality in the college admissions process. Terms like “diversity”, “race”, “merit”, “opportunity” and “equal” prominently illustrate this debate. This issue is also a central focus of the SFFA v. Harvard case and has been a significant topic in discussions about affirmative action for many years. According to Wolters [21], as early as 1969, Gallop poll posed the question of how individuals prioritize measures like preferential treatment for women and minorities versus ability as determined by test scores in the context of college admissions, and more than 80% of respondents favored ability. The fact that the majority of universities and colleges did not employ race-conscious admissions policies even before SFFA v. Harvard case may also reflect public sentiment on this issue [22]. In our topic case, one of the six claims made by SFFA against Harvard University is the use of race as a factor in admissions [8]. However, Harpalani [23] illustrates that many people will also concur that standardized test score do not adequately reflect a student's ability to contribute positively to campus life or to succeed academically and professionally in the future, suggesting that other criteria are also important for assessing a student's overall potential. This topic strongly reflects perspectives of users regarding this debate, which are heavily influenced by the realities discussed above.

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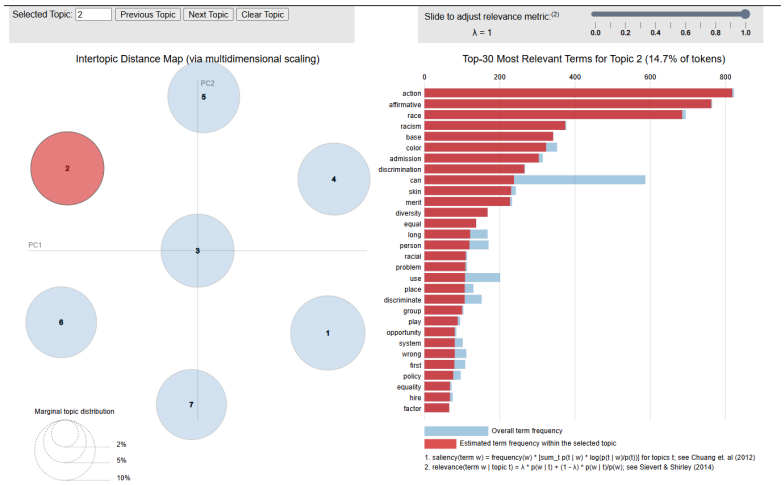

Figure 5. Key terms associated with topic 2

Topic 3 constitutes roughly 14.6% of all the content and primarily discusses the implications of students being admitted to universities that exceed their qualifications, which can lead to unsatisfactory outcomes. These students can be categorized into two types. Some users focus on those who gain admission to universities well beyond their actual abilities due to affirmative action. Many believe that this can result in feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction with academic performance, suggesting that affirmative action may not always benefit the minority groups it aims to support. A study examining data from approximately 27,000 students admitted to accredited law schools in 1991, and followed throughout their law school experience and beyond shows these concerns are reasonable [24]. The findings indicate that at the same educational level, higher-tier law schools in this case, African Americans were significantly less likely to complete the law school compared to whites [25]. The other group of users criticizes the presence of privileged groups in higher education admissions, particularly the ALDC group, which includes athletes, legacies (rich white people), development cases, and children of faculty [26]. According to Sukin, ALDC students represent less than 5% of all applicants to Harvard University, yet they account for 30% of the students accepted each year.

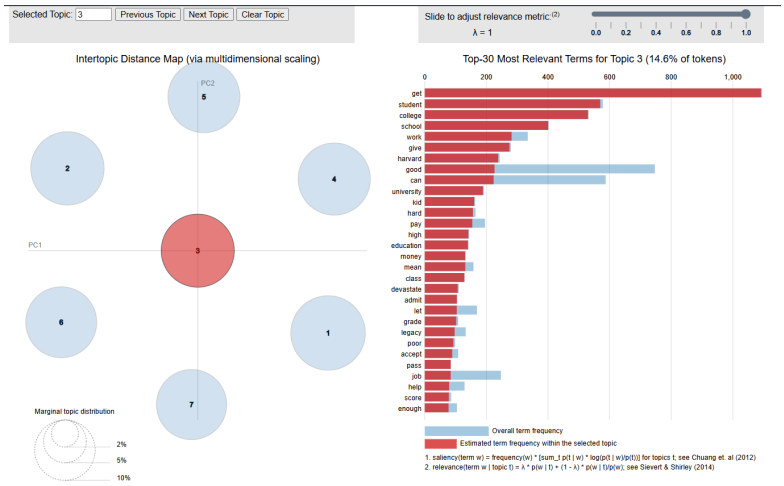

Figure 6. Key terms associated with topic 3

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Topic 4 makes up approximately 15.1% of the entire content, mainly discuss the racial issues surrounding the background of historical debate and the compensation methods in present day. The high frequency of “white”, “black” and “Asian” shows the discussion is mainly surround racial issues and these three races are protagonists. While words such as “woman”, “blame” and “slavery” suggests the historical discrimination towards vulnerable groups. From the most representative cases, we know that the perspectives towards this issues differs widely, while interestingly despite different perspectives, most people are against affirmative action. Some people believe that affirmative action is not enough to make up the bad treatment towards black in history, and some blame Asians for competing their performance in universities. While other users believe that the compensation methods towards black people is not fair for other minority groups and no longer suitable for today’s society.

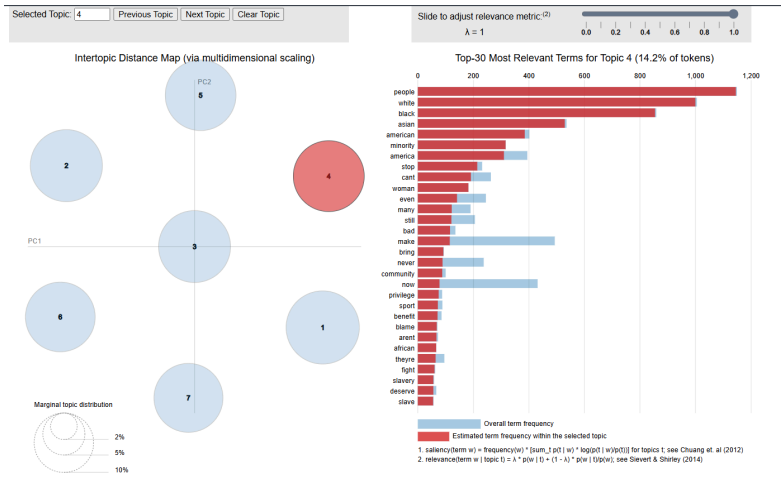

Figure 7. Key terms associated with topic 4

Topic 5 accounts about 14.1% of the entire content, primarily focuses on the political struggle between Democrats and Republicans. In this topic, individuals referenced the SFFA v. Harvard case to express their views on affirmative action and to show support for their preferred party. The frequent use of terms such as “Democrat,” “Republican,” “Trump,” “Biden,” and “party” indicates a strong political bias. The word “vote” in Figure 8, along with several representative cases from Topic 5, suggests elements of political propaganda within this discourse, particularly in light of the upcoming 2024 United States Presidential Election. Furthermore, some individuals' extreme attitudes toward the two parties reflect the rising political polarization associated with the current development of social media, as discussed in the literature review.

Topics 6 and 7 are relatively similar, as both examine public attitudes toward political figures. Topic 6 primarily focuses on Stephen A. Smith, an American sports commentator, journalist, and television personality known for his engaging debates on 'First Take.' The discussions surrounding him in this topic center on his views on affirmative action, which he articulated during a debate on Fox News. Public opinions about this debate vary widely. Some individuals perceive it as a civilized discussion, with both sides presenting their perspectives on affirmative action calmly and without shouting. Conversely, others strongly disagree with Smith's stance and label him as a “racist”.

While Topic 7 presents a more unified perspective on Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, referred to as AOC, who is a member of the Democratic Party and Congress. The frequent use of terms such as “idiot,” “dumb,” and “stupid” reflects a strong negative sentiment toward her. Criticism of AOC primarily centers on her understanding of the political system, with many believing that, as a

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congresswoman, she lacks knowledge about the roles of the Supreme Court and the concept of separation of powers. However, since this topic predominantly appears in the comments of Video 6, and considering that Fox News is widely regarded as a media outlet representing a conservative perspective, these comments may not accurately reflect the attitudes of all users.

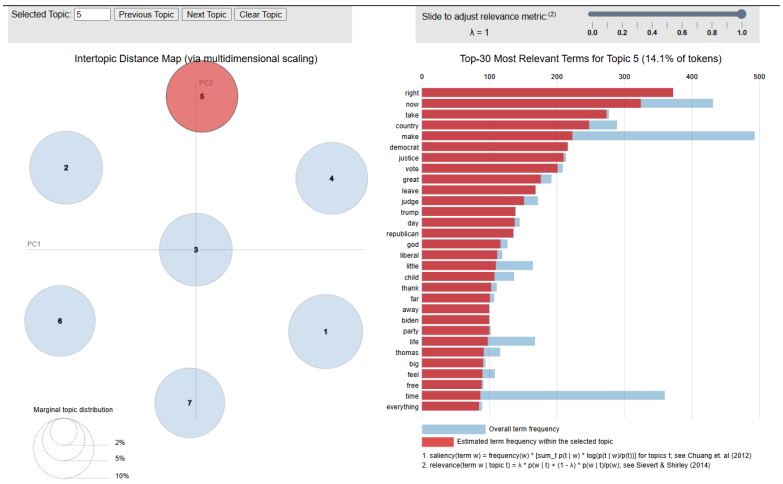

Figure 8. Key terms associated with topic 5

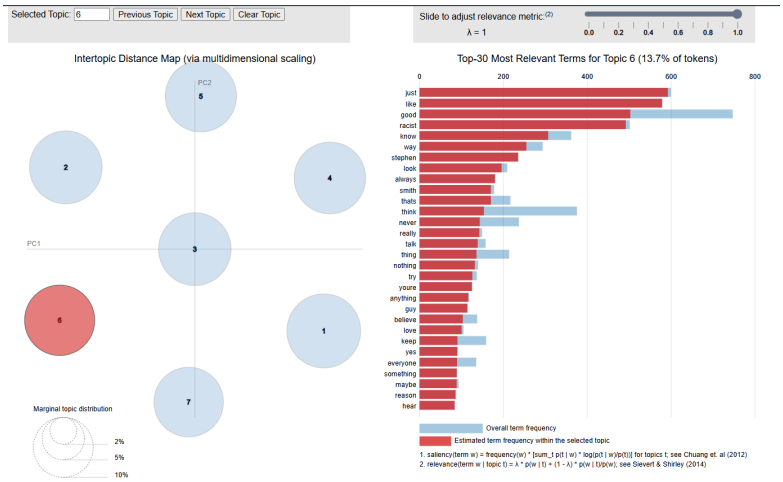

Figure 9. Key terms associated with topic 6

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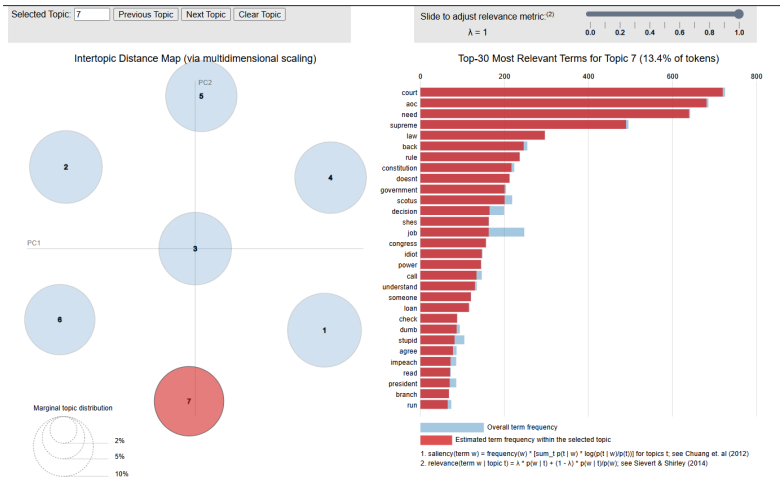

Figure 10. Key terms associated with topic 7

4. Conclusion

The Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard decision represents far more than a shift in legal doctrine—it is a major turning point in American higher education and social equity policy. By overturning Grutter v. Bollinger and prohibiting explicit race-conscious admissions nationwide, the Supreme Court has not only ended a decades-long legal framework but has also fundamentally altered the landscape for how fairness, opportunity, and diversity are pursued in higher education. This is a landmark reversal, reshaping both the tools available to institutions and the narratives surrounding meritocracy in the United States.

One of the case's most revealing aspects lies in its exposure of the subtle ways institutional bias can manifest. The litigation process brought to light Harvard's use of "personal ratings"—subjective evaluations of traits such as likability, courage, and kindness—which, according to SFFA's statistical analysis, tended to rate Asian American applicants lower despite their higher academic and extracurricular achievements. Whether or not the Court accepted these as proof of discrimination, the data highlighted how ostensibly neutral criteria can produce disparate outcomes. This serves as a reminder that systemic inequities are often embedded in processes that appear fair on their surface, making them harder to detect and even harder to challenge under a purely "colorblind" constitutional standard.

At the same time, the ruling underscores the limitations of traditional affirmative action mechanisms. For decades, race-conscious admissions sought to address historical and structural inequalities by explicitly considering race as part of a holistic review. Yet the Court's majority opinion deemed such policies too vague, too indefinite, and too prone to reinforcing stereotypes. In doing so, the decision has pushed the debate into new territory, where universities must explore race-neutral strategies that still advance diversity without violating constitutional constraints. This raises the question of whether alternative criteria—such as socioeconomic disadvantage, first-generation college status, and personal adversity—can effectively preserve diversity or whether the loss of explicit racial considerations will lead to measurable declines in representation for historically marginalized groups.

Looking ahead, American education and the workplace may shift toward admissions and recruitment frameworks that place greater emphasis on "difficult backgrounds" and "personal struggles." Such approaches could expand opportunity for students who have overcome significant obstacles—poverty, geographic isolation, family hardship—regardless of race. In theory, this could

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produce a more socioeconomically diverse student body while sidestepping the constitutional pitfalls of race-conscious policies. However, the open question remains: will these alternative models sustain both diversity and fairness in the long term, or will they simply produce a different but still unequal distribution of opportunity?

The ruling's implications reach beyond academia. Elite universities serve as gateways to influential careers in law, medicine, politics, business, and the arts. If diversity declines in these institutions, the ripple effect will eventually touch courtrooms, hospitals, boardrooms, and cultural institutions. This is particularly concerning for creative fields, where diversity of background and perspective directly influences the quality and originality of the work produced.

If higher education loses its racial and cultural diversity, the same loss will echo across the professional world—including in the arts. Chamber music without the interplay of different cultural sensibilities risks becoming technically excellent but emotionally uniform; a law firm without diverse voices risks blind spots in its counsel; a public policy body without varied life experiences risks making decisions that fail to account for the realities of all its constituents. Diversity is not an accessory—it is the foundation of innovation, empathy, and collective progress.

The SFFA v. Harvard decision has closed one chapter in the history of affirmative action, but it has not resolved the tension between equality of treatment and equality of opportunity. In fact, it has intensified the urgency of finding new, lawful ways to ensure that classrooms, workplaces, and creative spaces remain open to a truly representative range of voices.

We hope to raise awareness about this issue and contribute to the development of laws promoting equality in society. However, this paper has several limitations, including its reliance on a single video platform and a limited range of video sources, which we aim to address in our future work.

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Zhuoyan Chen and Huining Liang contributed equally to this work and should be considered co-first authors.

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