Race and Social Problems (2026) 18:18
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-025-09488-4

A Mixed Methods Study of Attitudes Toward Affirmative Action, Colorblindness, and White Privilege Among White Women College Students in the US

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Received: 14 March 2025 / Accepted: 4 December 2025

Abstract
This study seeks to address the research question: What are U.S. White women college students' attitudes toward race-conscious affirmative action policy in college admissions since the 2023 Supreme Court ruling, and how do they relate to their racial attitudes? We qualitatively examined participants' reasoning behind their opinions on the consideration of race as a factor in college admissions. In addition, we quantitatively examined the differences in participants' attitudes toward race-conscious admissions based on their colorblind racial attitudes and White privilege attitudes. 159 White women undergraduates from a rural Midwestern university between the ages of 18 and 23 ($M_{age} = 19.70$; $SD = 1.11$) were recruited from a required diversity course at the start of the semester. They responded to survey items and short answer questions. Seven qualitative themes were identified, with the most highly endorsed being "only merit should be considered," "considering race for equity," and "considering race is unfair." Short answer responses were also coded into categories to represent their support of/opposition to affirmative action for use in t-tests with racial attitude measures. Almost half of participants (48.4%) opposed the consideration of race in college admissions, while a little more than a third (37.1%) were in support. Quantitative results suggested that those in support reported lower scores on colorblind racial attitudes, and higher scores on awareness of White privilege and willingness to confront White privilege than those who reported opposing using race/ethnicity in admissions. This study has implications for how students are educated about race and racism.

Keywords Affirmative Action · Colorblind Racial Attitudes · White Privilege · College Students · White Women

Affirmative action policies in the US were first established in the 1960s to prevent discrimination in the workplace on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin (UCI Office of Equal Opportunity & Diversity, 2025; Unzueta et al., 2009). Though not legally mandated in institutions of higher education, many institutions adopted the practice around the time of the executive orders and the Civil Rights Movement, allowing college admissions committees to consider racial background as one factor in admissions decisions (Warikoo & Allen, 2020). Though there are a number of groups supported by the policy, the inclusion of race specifically in affirmative action policies in higher education has always been the most contentious. In six states, affirmative action on the basis of race was outlawed in universities (Warikoo & Allen, 2020). After numerous legal challenges at the federal level over the years that resulted in rulings to uphold the constitutionality of affirmative action, in 2023, the Supreme Court finally ruled race-conscious admissions at Harvard University and the University of North Carolina illegal, effectively banning affirmative action policies in admissions decisions on college campuses across the country.

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Published online: 11 December 2025

In the wake of this major policy change, which may have implications for the demographic composition of higher education institutions and professions that require a college degree, the current mixed methods study sought to address the research question: What are U.S. White women college students' attitudes toward race-conscious affirmative action policy in college admissions since the 2023 Supreme Court ruling, and how do they relate to their racial attitudes? We used qualitative data to understand White women college students' reasoning behind their views on the use of race as a factor in college admissions, and quantitative data to examine the differences in racial attitudes (i.e., colorblind racial attitudes, White privilege attitudes) among those who supported or opposed affirmative action.

Affirmative action has been part of social, political, and legal discourse in the US for over fifty years. Supporters of race-conscious admissions argue that these policies attempt to redress historical discriminatory practices that banned or limited attendance of people from marginalized groups, while also creating student bodies with diverse experiences that can better engage in a multicultural society (Orfield & Jarvie, 2020; Pike et al., 2007). They also argue that without explicitly considering persistent racial disparities in educational outcomes (e.g., standardized test scores, access to rigorous courses, subjective teacher ratings, etc.), the status quo for admissions systems has and will continue to advantage White students, especially those with more financial and social capital (Jayakumar & Page, 2021).

Affirmative action policies applied in educational contexts received backlash almost immediately, with detractors arguing that considering race in admissions decisions is unfair to White and Asian applicants, and some claiming that schools are weakening meritocratic structures by favoring under- or unqualified students from minoritized groups over White and Asian applicants, who are perceived as being more deserving of admission (Lee, 2021; Liu, 2011; Poon, 2017; Shteynberg et al., 2011). Those opposing affirmative action often argue that students should not receive college admission simply by virtue of being from a historically disadvantaged racial or ethnic group. These arguments are typically made irrespective of the amount of weight race is given in admissions decisions or the actual qualifications of students who are perceived as being helped or harmed by race-conscious admissions policies. As schools continue responding to legal and social pressures to end race-conscious affirmative action by cutting policies that suppositively disadvantage White students, scholars note that the underrepresentation of students from minoritized groups enrolled on college campuses is becoming more stark (Liu, 2022; Long & Bateman, 2020). Despite the minimal influence the modern iteration of these policies has had on the overall demographic makeup of student bodies at elite private universities and the most prestigious state-funded schools, race-conscious admissions remain a contentious topic on campuses across the United States.

Critical race theory posits that racism is a systemic problem reinforced by institutions and policies that contribute to worse outcomes for members of racially minoritized groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Past scholars have theorized that White people are invested in maintaining racist systems because they benefit psychologically and materially from racism (Lipsitz, 2006). The unearned—and largely unacknowledged—advantages of being White within a racially stratified society are referred to as *White privilege* (Pinteriits et al., 2009). The denial of White privilege goes hand in hand with *colorblind racial ideology*, or the belief that race does not play a role in individual outcomes (Neville et al., 2000). Colorblind racial ideology conveniently ignores the history and consequences of systemic racism to protect White privilege and uphold White supremacy (Collins & Walsh, 2024). Thus, the racial attitudes assessed in the current study are colorblind racial attitudes and White privilege attitudes, given we expect them to be related to attitudes toward race-conscious affirmative action policy in college admissions.

White People's Attitudes Toward Race-Conscious Admissions

It is important to consider White college students' opinions about race-conscious admissions given that they are among the groups purported to be most impacted by affirmative action policies. Overall, the majority of White Americans express disapproval of race-conscious admissions and claim that these policies make college admissions less fair (Pew Research Center, 2023). Past research exploring White people's perceptions of race-conscious admissions finds varied perspectives about the utility of this practice. Some White people expressed support for considering race in college admissions, touting the effect it can have on exposing White students to perspectives of groups which they rarely encounter outside of school settings (Warikoo, 2018). Alternatively, others have outlined sentiments opposing the use of race as an admissions consideration, because it was perceived to counter their ideals regarding meritocracy (Liu, 2011; Warikoo, 2018). Adding to the complexity of perspectives were those who partially supported affirmative action, but only for minoritized students who faced another disadvantage (e.g., low socioeconomic status) and those who support admissions policies that would likely benefit racially minoritized groups but would do so without explicitly considering race (e.g., increasing first-generation college student enrollment or placing less emphasis on standardized tests; Oh et al., 2010; Petts, 2022; Warikoo, 2018). Essentially, some were

willing to endorse increasing the enrollment of students from underrepresented racial groups, if this could be done using what could be interpreted as race-neutral or colorblind policies (Petts, 2022).

Despite assertions that recent generations in the US tend to be more "progressive" on racial issues, attitudes toward race-conscious admissions have never appeared to garner ubiquitous support among White college students. In fact, research suggests that their views about affirmative action are a microcosm of those from the broader society. For instance, in the late 2000s, Oh and colleagues (2010) found that compared to their peers, White college students were more likely to endorse the idea that race-conscious admissions policies are unfair and harmful to White people. Further, White students expressed concern that such policies are actually damaging to groups that receive this benefit (Oh et al., 2010), with some college students assuming these populations are uniquely unqualified. Recent findings from Pew Research Center (2023) suggest that not much has changed over time in terms of popular opinion, with 57% of White adults in 2023 reporting disapproval of universities taking race and ethnicity into account in admissions decisions to increase diversity.

As with the broader population, White students in the US report prioritizing definitions of merit in admissions that do not always align with institutional or community goals to improve diversity (Warikoo, 2018). Among White college students, opposition to the use of affirmative action in college admissions tends to be higher for men than women (Park, 2009; Sax & Arredondo, 1999), but this is not always the case (Awad et al., 2005). Many ideas about affirmative action are formed prior to arriving at college, which might partially explain why White college students' attitudes are similar to those reflected in discussions with White parents (Petts, 2022). Colleges are viewed by some as places that foster the adoption of politically progressive attitudes among White young adults. Indeed, there is evidence that some White college students' attitudes toward race-conscious admissions may be malleable, and that exposure to curriculum and participation in campus activities centering non-White experiences is associated with increased support for these policies at a four-year follow-up (Aberson, 2007). However, for many, being exposed to this knowledge does not guarantee future support for race-conscious admissions. Demonstrating this, a past study found that even among White college students who believed that racial discrimination was a problem in the US, the majority still opposed race-conscious admissions (Sax & Arredondo, 1999). Thus, we examine whether there are differences among White women college students' assessments of race-conscious admissions policies based on their racial attitudes (Park, 2009).

Affirmative Action Attitudes' Associations with Colorblind Racial Attitudes and White Privilege Attitudes

Colorblindness is an ideology that focuses on minimizing race and the racial dynamics that affect societies. Although it has been conceptualized in a range of ways (Gündemir & Kirby, 2022; Whitley et al., 2022), many theoretical perspectives consider it a form of racism. For example, one perspective has conceptualized colorblindness as comprising (a) color-evasive attitudes that emphasize sameness, and (b) power-evasive attitudes that argue that everyone has similar opportunities to succeed (Frankenberg, 1993). Consistent with this, one popular colorblind measure has established that people deny the existence of White privilege and institutional discrimination as forms of power-evasion. They also deny the presence of racial discrimination in more blatant ways, and all three of these forms of colorblindness (i.e., unawareness of racial privilege, institutional discrimination, and blatant racial issues) predict more racist attitudes (Neville et al., 2000).

Colorblindness, as well as White privilege beliefs, also predict a range of policy-related attitudes. For example, college students with higher privilege awareness reported higher interest in social justice, whereas those higher in colorblindness reported less interest in social justice (Garet-Walker et al., 2018). White Americans who are higher in power-evasive colorblindness have lower awareness of White privilege and in turn are less likely to endorse anti-racist practices such as learning about racial justice issues (Collins & Walsh, 2024). Moreover, in qualitative interviews, White Americans expressed concerns about unfair disadvantages to White people when discussing whether they support equal opportunity and affirmative action (DiTomaso et al., 2011).

However, little empirical research has directly assessed how attitudes toward affirmative action relate to colorblind racial attitudes and White privilege attitudes, and even fewer studies have had a specific focus on attitudes toward race-conscious affirmative action policy in college admissions. One study from two decades ago found that among White Americans in psychology courses, colorblind ideology is the strongest predictor of opposition to affirmative action, above and beyond racism (Awad et al., 2005). However, in the study, affirmative action was measured using six items that focus on employees and organizations, and do not specify a focus on the race-conscious admissions (e.g., "the goals of affirmative action are good"; "I would not like to work at an organization with an affirmative action plan"; Kravitz & Platania, 1999). Similarly, a 2012 publication using the same measure reported that for White college students reporting low prejudice, colorblindness predicted opposition to affirmative action; for at least one of the six items, they adapted

the focus to race, "the goals of race-based affirmative action are good," but the authors did not specify whether other items were adapted (Mazzocco et al., 2012). Another study from Oh and colleagues published in 2010 found that higher scores on colorblind racial attitudes were associated with anti-affirmative action arguments reported through open-ended responses. In Oh et al.'s (2010) study, the affirmative action questions were specific to whether participants "would vote for an initiative banning race-based affirmative action in higher education," and thus more aligned with the current study's focus on race-conscious affirmative action policy in college admissions.

Less is known about the relationships between attitudes toward affirmative action and White privilege. The present study examines three components of White privilege: White privilege awareness (i.e., understanding of White privilege), willingness to confront White privilege (i.e., plans to address White privilege), and anticipated costs of addressing White privilege (i.e., trepidation about addressing White privilege). To our knowledge, this measure has not been used previously in relation to attitudes toward affirmative action, but a previous study from the 1990s using a different White privilege measure did find that higher scores on awareness of White privilege were associated with more support for race-conscious affirmative action policy in both employment and education (Swim & Miller, 1999). Another study using a different measure of White privilege found that among college students surveyed in 2004–2005, greater awareness of White privilege was associated with more support for race-conscious affirmative action, with the sample affirmative action item addressing employment (unclear if other items focused on higher education; Case, 2007). Thus, the present study provides an important update to previous work, given that a) similar studies have not been conducted in over a decade, and b) the political climate has drastically changed with the 2023 Supreme Court ruling against the use of race as a factor in college admissions.

The current study also focuses on White women college students given their particular intersectional identity. Since White women hold both a privileged identity based on race and a disadvantaged identity based on gender, their support (or lack thereof) for affirmative action may be less predictable. Though affirmative action policies are often thought to focus on protecting racial-ethnic minority groups, they also prevent discrimination against women of all races, including White women (Unzueta et al., 2010). In fact, White women have benefitted the most from affirmative action, with a 1995 report from the U.S. Labor Department finding that since the 1960s, affirmative action helped 6 million women and 5 million racial minorities in the workplace (Guynn, 2023). Past research suggests that women tend to have more favorable attitudes toward affirmative action (Bobocel, 1998; Kravitz & Platania, 1993). One potential explanation by scholars is that the psychological benefits of diversity initiatives can "transfer" to White women, such that the presence of a diversity initiative (even if not targeted to them) can send a signal that women will also be treated more fairly in that context (Chaney et al., 2016). This may translate to more support for policies like affirmative action than might be expected based on their privileged racial identity.

However, Awad and colleagues (2005) did not find differences between men and women's attitudes in their study emphasizing racial issues, potentially due to the lack of focus on gender and thus the women participants not seeing themselves as minorities. Moreover, since 1996, women have been more likely to have a bachelor's degree than men, which could lead White women today to believing that affirmative action does not help them—and could even hurt them—in college admissions (Hurst, 2024). Moreover, scholars argue that historically, White women have played a key role in upholding white supremacy, and prejudice and fairness concerns can drive their opposition to affirmative action (Awad, 2005; Crosby et al., 2001; Golden et al., 2001; Ozais, 2023). Thus, the present study's focus on race-conscious admissions seeks to clarify the reasoning for whether White women support or oppose affirmative action when racial-ethnic minorities are the beneficiaries. Moreover, examining how racial attitudes and understanding of systemic inequality play a role in White women college students' attitudes toward race-conscious admissions may have important implications for how race is taught about in schools across the US.

Current Study

The present study seeks to build on previous findings with mixed methods data from the current historical moment following the U.S. 2023 Supreme Court decision regarding affirmative action to understand White women college students' attitudes toward race-conscious admissions, and how they differ based on colorblind and White privilege attitudes. The first goal of this study was to identify the qualitative themes of the different reasons participants provided to support their stance on race-conscious admissions. Based on prior literature, we expected that some general themes that would emerge would include using race to address systemic inequities, not using race because it is unfair, and not using race because of meritocratic values.

The second goal of the study was to determine White women college students' support of or opposition to the use of race as a factor in college admissions, and examine whether their stance differed based on their White privilege attitudes and colorblind racial attitudes. We hypothesized that those supporting race-conscious admissions would report lower levels of colorblind racial attitudes. In addition,

we hypothesized that White women college students who supported race-conscious admissions would report more willingness to confront White privilege and White privilege awareness compared to those opposed to affirmative action. Due to the limited previous research, we did not have a hypothesis for how support for or opposition to race-conscious admissions would differ based on anticipated costs of White privilege, making this analysis exploratory.

Method

Participants

The present study included 159 White women undergraduates between the ages of 18 and 23 years ($M_{age} = 19.70$; $SD = 1.11$) enrolled in a diversity course at a large public Midwest state university in a rural area. Participants indicated their academic year as 1st year (19.0%, $n = 30$), 2nd year (36.7%, $n = 58$), 3rd year (24.7%, $n = 39$), 4th year (17.1%, $n = 27$), and 5th year (2.5%, $n = 4$). They identified their social class as "lower class" (5.0%, $n = 8$), "lower middle class" (6.9%, $n = 11$), "middle class" (42.8%, $n = 68$), "upper middle class" (40.3%, $n = 64$), and "affluent/upper class" (5.0%, $n = 8$). Most students identified as "straight/heterosexual" (83.0%, $n = 132$).

Procedure

This study is part of the Diversity Education Study (DivES) project. All study procedures were approved by the institutional review board. Students enrolled in a 200-level undergraduate diversity course of the Human Development and Family Science (HDFS) program during the Fall 2023 and Spring 2024 semesters—following the affirmative action Supreme Court ruling on June 29, 2023—were required to complete an online survey on Qualtrics as part of their coursework. Although participation in the survey was mandatory, students could choose whether or not to give permission for their data to be included in the study. Across all classes, a total of 239 students were enrolled, and 23 (9.6%) declined to have their data included. Thus, the current study's sample was drawn from a broader data collection involving 216 undergraduates, with a racial breakdown of White (87.0%, $n = 188$), Asian/Asian American (9.3%, $n = 20$), Latiné 6.5%, $n = 14$), Black (5.1%, $n = 11$), Arab/Middle Eastern North African (2.8%, $n = 6$), Native American (0.5%, $n = 1$), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (0.5%, $n = 1$), and 22 (10.2%) Multiracial (i.e., more than one racial group).[1] Most participants from the larger sample were identified as women (96.3%, $n = 208$), followed by men (4.2%, $n = 9$), non-binary (1.4%, $n = 3$), not listed with an option to specify (0.5%, $n = 1$), and those who preferred not to answer (0.5%, $n = 1$).[2] Eligibility criteria for the present study required that participants be monoracial White women at least 18 years of age enrolled in the course.

Students in the course are predominantly from majors affiliated with the university's College of Health and Human Sciences (e.g., HDFS, psychological sciences, nursing) and complete it as part of their required core curriculum and/or to fulfill a general education requirement. The survey is assigned during the first week of classes, before the students experience the course content. Students under the age of 18 were not eligible for data inclusion but could still complete the survey for coursework.

Participants completed a 30–45 minute survey in which they reviewed a consent form detailing the study's purpose, length, risks, benefits, and confidentiality, and provided consent for their data to be included. The survey contained questions about racial attitudes and beliefs and the recent Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action. To protect student confidentiality and avoid undue coercion, the data were managed by a third-party representative from the university's Office of Undergraduate Research. Throughout the semester, instructors were only provided with information about which students completed the survey for grading purposes.

Measures

The measures appeared to participants in the order presented below (with additional measures in between that were not used in the present study).

Demographic Questions

Participants self-reported their age, race, gender, sexual orientation, academic year, and socioeconomic status.

Race. Participants reported their race using the question, "What is your racial background? Please check all that apply," with the following options: a) African American/Black, b) Asian American/Asian (including Indian and Filipina/o/x), c) Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, d) White/European, e) Hispanic/Latinx, f) Native American/American Indian, g) Arab/Middle Eastern/North African

[1] Participants could select more than one racial background; therefore, the counts and percentages do not sum to 100%.

[2] Participants could select more than one gender identity; therefore, the counts and percentages do not sum to 100%.

American, h) Not listed, please specify: _____ (open-ended), and i) Prefer not to answer.

Gender. Participants reported their gender using the question, "What is your gender identity?" with the following options: a) Woman, b) Man, c) Non-binary, d) Not listed, please specify: _____ (open-ended), and e) Prefer not to answer.

Support/Opposition to Race-Conscious Admissions

Opinions on affirmative action were assessed using a dichotomous variable (support or oppose) created from the open-ended question, "Based on your own knowledge, what are your views on the role of race/ethnicity in college admissions? Do you believe it should be considered as a factor in the admissions process? Please explain your thoughts." Responses did not have any time or word count limitations. The first author coded each of the short answer responses to the questions about whether race should be used as a factor in college admissions with the goal of determining whether participants supported or opposed affirmative action. In addition to a support code applied for any response that indicated race should be a factor, and an oppose code for responses that stated race should not be a factor, an "uncertain" code emerged for eight (5%) participants who clearly stated they did not know, and an "unclear" code was used for 15 (8.4%) participants who did not clearly indicate their support or opposition (e.g., gave reasons both for and against without choosing one or the other). The fourth author assisted in discussing any vague responses with the first author to help finalize codes. These codes were quantified and the dichotomous support/oppose code was utilized in the quantitative analysis, with the 23 (14.4%) participants coded as uncertain and unclear excluded from quantitative analysis.

White Privilege Attitudes

White privilege attitudes were measured using an 18-item version of the White Privilege Attitudes Scale (WPAS; Pinterits et al., 2009). The scale consisted of three subscales: a) Willingness to Confront White Privilege (8 items; e.g., "I plan to work to change our unfair social structure that promotes White privilege"), b) Anticipated Costs of Addressing White Privilege (6 items; e.g., "I am worried that taking action against White privilege will hurt my relationships with other Whites"), and c) White Privilege Awareness (4 items; e.g., "White people have it easier than people of color"). Participants rated how much they agreed with the statements on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*). The subscales demonstrated good reliability: Willingness to Confront White Privilege ($\alpha = .86$), Anticipated Costs of Addressing White Privilege ($\alpha = .85$), and White Privilege Awareness ($\alpha = .84$). Items were averaged to compute composite scores for the three subscales, with higher scores indicating higher endorsement of willingness to confront White privilege, anticipated costs of addressing White privilege, and White privilege awareness.

Colorblind Racial Attitudes

Colorblind racial attitudes were measured using the 14-item Colorblind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS; Neville et al., 2000). Participants rated how much they agreed with the racial statements on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*). A sample item from the scale is, "Racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S. have certain advantages because of the color of their skin." The scale demonstrated good reliability, $\alpha = .91$. Items were averaged to compute a composite score for the scale, with a higher score indicating higher endorsement of colorblind racial attitudes.

Mixed Methods Analysis

Data were analyzed using a convergent mixed methods design, whereby quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously, analyzed separately, and then triangulated to synthesize the quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The qualitative analysis is described next, followed by a description of the quantitative analysis.

Qualitative Analysis

The short answer responses coded for the support/opposition to race-conscious admissions variable were independently coded a second time for the qualitative analysis, but for this round of coding, the goal was identifying themes representing the different reasoning and opinions participants had about the use of race as a factor in college admissions. We utilized the consensual qualitative research-modified approach (Spangler et al., 2012), designed specifically for analyzing brief open-ended responses from larger samples. Responses ranged in length from four words to 184 words. The first author, who identifies as a Biracial Asian and White woman, and three White women undergraduate research assistants each read through all of the short answer responses. Each coder separately identified preliminary codes, and the four researchers then met to share and discuss their codes and draft a codebook. Next, the research assistants independently coded half of the responses using the codebook, then met with the first author as a group to compare codes, reconcile discrepancies, and refine the codebook. This process was repeated with the second half of the responses. All relevant codes were applied to each

response, such that there could be multiple codes assigned. The first author completed a final round of combining redundant codes and checking for accuracy of codes with the final codebook. The fourth author, a graduate research assistant who identifies as an Asian man and was not involved in early rounds of coding, was presented with the different groups of responses, unlabeled, and asked to describe the themes without seeing the codebook. His descriptions matched the codebook, supporting validity.

Quantitative Analysis

T-tests were used to examine differences in mean scores on the colorblind racial attitudes and White privilege attitudes subscales for those who supported vs. opposed race-conscious admissions. Cohen's d was used to examine effect sizes, with the commonly cited guidelines of small = 0.20, medium = 0.50, and large = 0.80 (Cohen, 1988).

Results

Qualitative Results: Attitudes Toward Race-Conscious Admissions

Seven themes were identified based on participant responses to the question, "Based on your own knowledge, what are your views on the role of race/ethnicity in college admissions? Do you believe it should be considered as a factor in the admissions process? Please explain your thoughts." The themes included: considering race for equity, considering race to increase racial diversity, only merit should be considered, both merit and race should be considered, other indicators of disadvantage should be considered, considering race is unfair, and seeing both sides. The breakdown of endorsement of themes is presented in Table 1.

Considering Race for Equity

Forty-one participants (25.8%) advocated for the consideration of race in college admissions as a way to make up for the barriers faced by racialized minorities. Participants mentioned both past and present systemic discrimination, bringing up issues of racial segregation, redlining, and the overrepresentation of White students in universities. For example, participants noted how race and socioeconomic status affected "access to tutors, prep schools, and advanced sports programs," and that "white people are often in power because they have access to the best education and connections." One participant highlighted the institutional advantage given to those with legacy status in college admissions, "Historically there is a prevalence of white individuals being admitted to college over people of color, which can also be attributed to them having legacy status" (4th year, age 21). Overall, students recognized that considering race in admissions is an effort to achieve equity for historically oppressed racial groups:

> …Historically POC have had disadvantages and hardships that white people will never understand in terms of generational racial segregation and hate. Although racism in the US looks different than it has in the past, bias will always exist and affirmative action is put in place to protect POC and protect their education. (3rd year, age 20)

Of the 41 participants represented by this theme, 2 (4.9%) were not in support of the use of race in admissions, 3 (7.3%) were unsure, 3 (7.3%) did not have a clear stance, and the overwhelming majority (33; 80.5%) were supportive of the use of race as a factor in admissions.

Considering Race to Increase Racial Diversity

Twenty-three participants (14.5%) wrote that race should be considered in college admissions because it is important to have a racially diverse college student body. For instance, one 5th year student (age unreported) shared,

Table 1 Breakdown of themes and opinions on race being included as a factor in college admissions (N = 159)

Theme	Overall Sample N (%)	Support N (%)	Oppose N (%)	Unsure N (%)	Unclear N (%)
Didn't answer the question	7 (4.3%)				
Considering race for equity	41 (25.8%)	33 (80.5%)	2 (4.9%)	3 (7.3%)	3 (7.3%)
Considering race to increase racial diversity	23 (14.5%)	16 (70%)	5 (21.7%)	0	2 (8.7%)
Only merit should be considered	47 (29.6%)	1 (2.1%)	43 (91.4%)	1 (2.1%)	2 (4.3%)
Race and merit should both be considered	19 (11.9%)	17 (89.5%)	0	0	2 (10.5%)
Other indicators of disadvantage should be considered	3 (1.8%)	0	3 (1.8%)	0	0
Considering race is unfair	32 (20.8%)	1 (3%)	27 (81.8%)	3 (9%)	2 (6%)
Seeing both sides	25 (15.7%)	5 (20%)	12 (48%)	3 (12%)	5 (20%)

> I think it is very important for students to be on a diverse campus. This helps students interact with people from various backgrounds and learn about others and their culture. If race/ethnicity being a factor in admissions helps create a diverse environment, I think it should be considered a factor.

Thus, she noted that having a diverse campus allows for learning about other people's cultures. Another participant (2nd year, age 19) stated,

> I think it is important to incorporate race and ethnicity in college because we live in such a diverse world. When it comes to your career you are expected to be able to work with anyone and everyone. The only way to insure [sic] we are all comfortable with each other is to bring it up in conversation and keep it super open.

This participant's argument for diversity highlighted how diverse interactions in college prepare students for interacting with diverse people and ideas in their career. However, while these 23 participants recognized the importance of diversity, nine (39%) of them also felt conflicted about race being considered over other factors. For example, a 4th year (age unreported) wrote,

> I do think that it's important for universities to prioritize diversifying their student body however, I do believe that it's unethical to use a person's race or ethnicity as a deciding factor allowing them to be accepted. University acceptance rates should be based on the student's academic abilities rather than their ethnic or racial background.

However, these conflicted participants were mainly concerned about racially minoritized individuals being accepted based "primarily" or "solely" on their race.

Five (21.7%) of the participants who mentioned that considering race allows for more racial diversity on campus were still against the use of race in admissions, while 16 (70%) were in support of the use of race in admissions. For two participants (8.7%), their stance was unclear, as their first sentences emphasized the importance of diversity, but were followed with "however" and disapproval of candidates being chosen because of their race.

Only Merit Should Be Considered

The most common theme, representative of 47 respondents (29.6%), was that admissions should only be based on merit, with factors such as grades, intelligence, accomplishments, and extracurricular activities being considered, but race not playing any role in the admissions decision. One 1st year student (age unreported) said,

> ...I do not think anyone should include their race on their application… I think that by not including race on the application it gives everyone a clean slate and even playing ground, causing the administrators to choose solely based on the strength of the application.

Another participant (3rd year, age 20) stated, "I do not believe that it should be considered in the admissions process. Getting accepted into college should be based on merit and merit alone. Giving one race an upper hand that another does not receive is racism in itself." Thus, considering race was seen as "irrelevant," and these participants advocated for college admissions to be determined only by merit-based indicators of intellect and academic ability. Forty-three (91.4%) of the participants who mentioned this theme were against the use of race in admissions, and of the remaining four, only one (2.1%) was in support, one (2.1%) was undecided, and two (4.3%) had an unclear stance.

Race and merit should both be considered

Nineteen (11.9%) of the participants believed that race should be considered as one factor alongside other merit indicators. For example, one 3rd-year student (age 20) wrote,

> It can be considered but it shouldn't be the deciding factor. All students should be given the equal opportunity to be accepted into college and when deciding whether a student should be accepted or not admissions should take everything about their applications into consideration.

Despite saying that race should be taken into consideration, participants stressed that underqualified racialized minorities should not be accepted over students with better credentials. One 3rd year (age 20) wrote, "…I believe it should be considered, but it should not reduce the admissions of equally qualified students," while a 1st year (age 19) stated, "I believe that race/ethnicity should be considered as a factor in college admissions in order to create a diverse community. However… a University should hold the same academic standard regardless of race/ethnicity." Thus, these participants supported race being a factor as long as it was not used to compensate for lower academic performance. Seventeen (89.5%) of participants represented by this theme were in support of race-conscious admissions, and for two (10.5%), their stance was unclear.

Other Indicators of Disadvantage Should be Considered

Only three (1.9%) participants suggested that, instead of using race, inequity should be accounted for using other indicators, namely socioeconomic status and the area one comes from. A 2nd-year student (age 19) said,

> No, I do not think race/ethnicity should be considered. I believe grades and intelligence should be put first. I do although think area of residence/school district should be taken into consideration. Having resources in wealthier areas can be advantageous in high schools.

Similarly, one 1st year (age 19) stated, "I don't think it should be considered, but the area of which you come from should, such as a higher percentage of POC are from the inner city which has a lower rate of university attendance." Thus, these participants acknowledged that systemic inequities exist, but attributed these to class, even though the student above recognized the correlation between being a person of color (POC) and class. All three of these participants were opposed to race-conscious admissions.

Considering Race is Unfair

Thirty-three participants (20.8%) stated that considering race in college admissions is unfair. One reason participants felt considering race as a factor was unfair was because individuals cannot control their race. Participants also believed that allowing race to be a factor resulted in students who were less deserving taking the spots of more qualified students, as noted by a 4th year (age 21), "…I also believe it can take away spots from individuals who are more deserving who cannot control their race." Even this participant who recognized that factoring in race was meant to promote equity ultimately felt that it is unfair to not base admissions solely on one's qualifications, "I think it can be used as a tool to give underprivileged people access to better education, but I also think it can be unfair to those who do deserve the same opportunities and the most qualifying individuals should get a spot, not based on race" (4th year, age 21).

Some participants stated that including race leads to more racial discrimination in the admissions process, noting that the people making the admissions decisions could be racist. One first year student (age unreported) said,

> I think affirmative action has made it difficult for certain races to get into harder schools, while making it easier for others. For example many Asian students are struggling to get into Harvard compared to Black students even though their grades and test scores are a lot higher.

Another 2nd year (age 19) wrote,

> If a person has more credentials than someone else then they should be there. It's just like how white males have the hardest time getting into top tier schools, there should not [be] a difference between if you are a white male, black male, white female, black female, rich or poor, or any other race/ethnicity.

Thus, some discussed the inclusion of race as a disadvantage to some racialized minorities, such as Asian Americans, while others focused on it as a potential disadvantage to White applicants. Among this code, only one participant (3%) "leaned toward" supporting race-conscious admissions, while three (9%) were unsure, two (6%) were unclear, and the remaining 27 (81.8%) were opposed.

Seeing Both Sides

Twenty-five participants (15.7%) noted arguments both for and against the use of race in admissions, oftentimes contradicting themselves. Note that all of these participants also had responses coded under at least one of the above themes. Some of these participants mentioned the importance of diversity, but emphasized having a fair, merit-based admissions process, as noted by this 4th-year student (age 21):

> I believe college admissions should be based off of how well one does in school, applies themself, extracurricular activities, etc., but at the same time I do believe we need to expand and continue diversity within college admissions.

Others felt conflicted, recognizing that considering race helps address the lack of opportunities that racialized minority students may have had due to systemic racism, but still finding it unfair:

> I think it is a complicated concept. I can see both sides of the argument. I think a reason why it could be beneficial is because certain races may experience systemic racism, causing difficulties in schooling or applying for higher education. However, I think affirmative action has harmful implications. Affirmative action does not seem like it is a fix or a solve to discrimination. Having unequal standards for admissions seems discriminatory in itself. (3rd year, age 20)

Among these participants, 12 (48%) were opposed to race-conscious admissions, five (20%) were in support, three (12%) were unsure, and five (20%) were unclear.

Quantitative Results: Relationships Between Attitudes Toward Race-Conscious Admissions and Racial Attitudes

Descriptives

Authors coded the qualitative responses into one of four simplified categories: Support, Oppose, Participant Unsure, and Stance Unclear. Based on what participants said in their short answer responses, almost half of participants (48.4%, $n=77$) opposed the consideration of race in college admissions, 59

(37.1%) were in support of race being included, 8 (5%) were unsure, and 15 (9.4%) did not have a clear stance. In terms of demographic differences among participants who supported or opposed race-conscious admissions, t-test results indicated there were no significant differences based on age, academic year, or social/economic group identity.

Differences in Racial Attitudes among Supporters and Opposers of Race-Conscious Admissions

T-test results and mean scores on each subscale for those who supported and opposed race-conscious admissions are presented in Table 2. There was a significant difference in colorblind racial attitudes detected between participants who supported vs. those who opposed the inclusion of race as a factor in college admissions, with participants who opposed race-conscious admissions reporting a significantly higher score on colorblind racial attitudes, $t(133) = 3.53$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.84$. For White privilege attitudes, there were significant differences between groups for both willingness to confront White privilege, $t(133) = -4.01$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.82$, and White privilege awareness, $t(133) = -3.64$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.07$. Participants who supported race-conscious admissions had significantly higher scores on both measures. No significant differences emerged between groups for anticipated costs of White privilege.

Discussion

The present study sought to qualitatively understand the reasoning behind U.S. White women college students' attitudes toward affirmative action (defined in this study as supporting the use of race as a factor in college admissions), as well as understand how support of or opposition to race-conscious admissions differed by their colorblind and White privilege attitudes. While past research has examined related questions, such as Oh and colleagues' (2010) study showing that students of color viewed race-conscious affirmative action in higher education as more helpful than White students, and finding associations between high colorblind racial attitudes and opposition to affirmative action, the political and legal changes leading to the current historical moment called for updated research on the topic. Conducting this study after the 2023 Supreme Court of the United States ruling that ended race-conscious affirmative action in college admissions and using a mixed methods approach allowed us to build on past findings and contribute to the literature by a) examining whether attitudes toward race-conscious admissions have shifted among this younger generation in the wake of the legal battle, b) providing a more nuanced qualitative understanding of White women college students' thoughts on race-conscious admissions, and c) understanding how support of/opposition to race-conscious admissions differs by racial attitudes. Given that White women simultaneously hold privileged and oppressed identities, it is theoretically important to understand the nuances in their reactions.

To understand the thoughts of White women college students regarding their attitudes toward race-conscious admissions, we coded their responses to an open-ended question asking about their views on the role of race/ethnicity in college admissions and whether they believed it should be considered as a factor in the admissions process. We examined the breakdown of their opinion (support, oppose, unsure, stance unclear) overall and within each theme.

The first theme, *considering race for equity*, represented participants' recognition of the long history of systemic oppression and institutional inequities that puts racialized minorities at a disadvantage. Thus, these White women college students' views aligned with the intended purpose of affirmative action: to take into account how racialized minorities face additional barriers to getting a high-quality education. For instance, due to racial segregation that effectively exists today despite being illegal, schools are not equally resourced, which can impact course access, grades, quality of education, and opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities, factors which are typically considered in holistic college admissions decisions. Participants showed awareness of this through mentions of segregation, redlining, and differential access to tutors.

Table 2 T-tests for race-conscious admissions supporters and opposers in relation to racial attitudes (N = 136)

Dependent Variable	Group		*t*	*df*	*p*	Cohen's d
	Support ($n = 59$)	Oppose ($n = 77$)				
	M(*SD*)	*M*(*SD*)				
Colorblind Racial Attitudes	2.22 (0.81)	2.74 (0.86)	3.53	133	< .001	0.84
Willingness to Confront White Privilege	4.65 (0.74)	4.08 (0.87)	−4.01	133	< .001	0.82
Anticipated Costs of Addressing White Privilege	2.89 (0.86)	2.77 (1.07)	−0.72	133	.475	0.98
White Privilege Awareness	4.93 (0.86)	4.26 (1.21)	−3.64	133	< .001	1.07

Participants also mentioned that White individuals are overrepresented among those who benefit from legacy status. Indeed, due to systemic barriers mentioned above and the fact that for centuries only White men were allowed to attend college, the majority of applicants with legacy status are White, earning the legacy preference the description of "affirmative action for rich people" (Castilla & Poskanzer, 2022; Coates, 2010). Moreover, the well-documented wealth disparities that exist today translate to higher percentages of White families being able to afford to send their children to top schools and pay for expensive SAT prep courses that will improve their test scores. The majority of participants who mentioned the role that affirmative action plays in leveling the playing field to promote equity were in support of race-conscious admissions, and communicated being aware of some of these inequities.

Another theme was *considering race to increase racial diversity*, wherein participants said it was important to consider race in admissions in order to admit a more racially diverse student body. These responses also focused on how it would benefit all students, including themselves, to be in a diverse environment and learn from each other's different perspectives. Using the critical race theory tenet of *interest convergence* (i.e., the majority group only tolerates racial progress when it is in their best interest; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Goldstein Hode & Meisenbach, 2017), one interpretation of this is that White women college students are willing to accept race being considered in admissions because they believe they will personally benefit from interacting with students of color. Though the majority of these participants supported race-conscious admissions, a notable 22% of participants in this theme were still opposed to race-conscious admissions despite knowing the role it plays in diversifying the student body.

The theme with the most support from participants at about 30% of the sample was *only merit should be considered*. In line with previous research where participants expressed prioritizing meritocracy, these participants stated that admissions should only be determined by merit, and race should not matter in college admissions (Liu, 2011; Warikoo, 2018). The vast majority were in opposition to race-conscious admissions. These opinions seem to stem from beliefs about meritocracy, the idea that anyone who works hard has the opportunity to succeed regardless of their social position. However, meritocracy is often referred to as a myth, because it does not account for the systemic barriers that oppressed groups face that limit their opportunities regardless of how hard they work (Liu, 2011). Meritocracy has even been described as a form of colorblind racism that functions to protect White privilege by ignoring the realities of how racism impacts the lived experiences and opportunities of people of color (Samson, 2013).

Another theme comprised primarily of participants in opposition to race-conscious admissions was *considering race is unfair*, communicated by about 20% of participants. For many of these participants, it seemed the default assumption was that qualified and deserving White students were losing their spots to underqualified and undeserving students of color. Again, this is consistent with the myth of meritocracy, in that individuals tend to be confident that they are deserving of their status because they earned it through their own effort and talent (Liu, 2011). It is also notable that students raised concerns about affirmative action creating disparate treatment, which demonstrates continued misinformation about affirmative action (e.g., believing that students are admitted solely based on race, or equating affirmative action with quotas, which are illegal and not used in the US). Furthermore, the assumptions that students of color are less qualified and deserving could be based in negative racial stereotypes and colorblind attitudes that tend to be pervasive on PWI campuses. Prior research suggests that college professors used colorblind frameworks to explain underrepresentation of students of color in STEM, blaming cultural deficits, individual behaviors and choices, lack of preparation, and poverty without adequately acknowledging the role of systemic racial oppression (Russo-Tait, 2022). However, participants also believed that the consideration of race could lead to more racial bias that would harm some minoritized students, such as Asian Americans, in favor of others. This is in line with findings from Oh and colleagues (2010), whose participants reported that affirmative action unfairly discriminates against White and Asian Americans. The majority (82%) of participants in this theme opposed race-conscious admissions, with 9% unsure, 6% unclear, and 3% (one participant) "leaning toward" support.

Another set of participants comprising about 12% of the sample believed *race and merit should both be considered*, and thus the theme was labeled as such. Though these participants were generally against compromising any academic standards in light of one's race, 90% supported race-conscious admissions. Interestingly, only 2% of the sample were coded under *other indicators of disadvantage should be considered*. These participants acknowledged systemic oppression, but were against race-conscious admissions, advocating for factors such as school district and socioeconomic status to be used instead of race. These ideas also fall into a colorblind framework because they champion seemingly race-neutral factors as fair admissions considerations *without* addressing systemic racism's influence on these factors (Goldstein Hode & Meisenbach, 2017).

The last theme was *seeing both sides,* which represented almost 16% of the sample who often said a combination of the above themes' ideas. However, we coded this separately given it was interesting that some participants understood the arguments both for and against race-conscious

admissions, and yet most of these participants (48%) were still opposed to race-conscious admissions, with 20% in support, 20% unclear, and 12% unsure. For instance, 39% of the participants coded under *considering race to increase racial diversity* mentioned how conflicted they were about race being considered over other factors (e.g., merit). In other words, despite acknowledging the value of a racially diverse campus, more than a fifth of participants still did not believe having racial diversity was important enough to support affirmative action and admissions would only be fair if solely based on merit. These findings further suggest the distinctiveness of diversity and meritocracy values, wherein people from advantaged groups might not support racial justice initiatives in situations where diversity is perceived as at-odds with merit, and especially with initiatives that present the possibility that advantaged groups' achievements may be partially attributed to race rather than merit (Knowles et al., 2014; Konrad et al., 2021).

Among the overall sample, almost half of participants (48.4%, $n=77$) opposed the consideration of race in college admissions, while a little more than a third (37.1%, $n=59$) were in support, and fewer were unclear in their stance (9.4%, $n=15$) or unsure (5%, $n=8$). Comparing these numbers from White women college students attending a predominantly White, large, Midwest public university between Fall 2023 and Spring 2024 to Pew Research Center findings from a survey in Spring 2023 showing that 57% of White U.S. adults disapprove of selective colleges considering race and ethnicity in admission decisions, while 29% approve, and 14% are unsure (Pew Research Center, 2023), there is similarly more opposition than support, though the gap is smaller in the sample of White women college students.

In regard to the question about whether attitudes toward race-conscious admissions relates to racial attitudes, findings suggested that White women college students who support race-conscious admissions were less colorblind in their racial attitudes, more aware of White privilege, and more willing to confront White privilege than those who reported opposing using race/ethnicity in admissions decisions. These results are in line with a recent study suggesting that White participants who are less colorblind and more aware of White privilege are more likely to support antiracist practices (Collins & Walsh, 2024). Moreover, our quantitative findings also echo findings from past studies finding that greater awareness of White privilege is associated with more support for race-conscious affirmative action policy (Case, 2007; Swim & Miller, 1999), as well as studies showing that among White college students, those with stronger colorblind racial attitudes were less likely to support affirmative action (Awad et al., 2005; Mazzocco et al., 2012; Oh et al., 2010).

A key contribution of this study is its focus on White women's perceptions of race-conscious affirmative action policy in college admissions in the US. While the media frames affirmative action as primarily race-based (despite policies addressing race *and* gender), data suggest that historically, White women significantly benefited from affirmative action policies (Crenshaw, 2006; Hartmann, 1996; Unzueta et al., 2010; Walker et al., 2022). Such disapproval may be attributed to the public framing of affirmative action as race-based rather than gender-based. Prior research suggests that when survey questions about affirmative action ask about race *before* gender, respondents express more disapproval of affirmative action policies (Wilson et al., 2008). Thus, in cases where White women perceive race-conscious affirmative action as a threat to White privilege and exceptionalism, priming White women to think about race in the affirmative action debate may spark racial bias and negative affect, leading to a rejection of affirmative action ideals at the expense of its gender equity benefits.

Limitations and Future Directions

It is important to note that this study is not representative of all White women college students in the US, but limited to students enrolled in a required diversity course within a College of Health and Human Sciences at a large, public, PWI in the Midwest. Another limitation of this study is that participants were primarily middle class and upper middle class. A follow-up study might utilize an interview format to gather more detailed and nuanced data regarding participants' racial attitudes and opinions on race-conscious admissions. Another future study idea would be to examine White women college students' attitudes regarding considering gender as a factor in college admissions alongside attitudes toward the consideration of race as a factor, particularly among STEM students or majors that tend to have more men than women. Future research can explore interventions for dispelling misconceptions about affirmative action that can reframe such policies as initiatives for both racial and gender equity. Additionally, research on stigma-based solidarity (Craig & Richeson, 2016) among White women may offer insights for framing educational equity initiatives as beneficial to White women on the basis of rectifying discrimination shared with racially minoritized students and remedying educational inequity as a shared social responsibility (Goldstein Hode & Meisenbach, 2017). Finally, given that responses coded for this study were collected at the start of the semester, future research should examine how being enrolled in a diversity course changes racial attitudes over the course of the semester to see whether taking diversity courses can serve as an intervention to change racial attitudes and develop critical racial consciousness.

Implications and Conclusion

This study has important implications for the critical consciousness literature and policies regarding the inclusion of diversity courses in university and preK-12 curricula. Study findings suggest that being educated about systemic racial inequality may be key to dispelling the myth of meritocracy and colorblind racial ideology (Brannon, 2018; Cargile et al., 2019; Mekawi et al., 2020; Saavedra et al., 2025). Thus, starting to teach Ethnic Studies and diversity courses that address the history of racism experienced by racialized minority groups in the US and integrating these historical truths into existing mainstream course curricula (e.g., history, language arts) in primary school may be critical to developing this racial awareness among future generations that have the potential to promote racial equity in U.S. society (Pinedo et al., 2024; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Ethnic Studies may be especially beneficial for White women's critical consciousness development, since dispelling beliefs in meritocracy may be tied to White racial identity exploration and dismantling White privilege (Case, 2007; Knowles & Lowery, 2011; San Pedro, 2018; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Although the fight for Ethnic Studies and diversity education is not without its challenges in the current U.S. political context (e.g., Chang, 2022; Cunanan et al., 2023; López & Sleeter, 2023), these courses and related critical consciousness-raising interventions may have important downstream impacts on race-related educational policy and broader race relations in the United States.

Overall, our data emphasize how understanding historic and systemic forms of racism and acknowledging the power and privilege held by members of a socially dominant group is associated with support for policies such as affirmative action. Opposition to the consideration of race in college admissions was more prevalent among our sample of White women college students than support. Findings suggest that despite the recognition of the value of having a racially diverse student body, belief in the myth of meritocracy serves as a strong justification for opposition to race-conscious affirmative action policy in college admissions.

Acknowledgements We would like to acknowledge the Office of Undergraduate Research staff for their assistance in managing the data collection, and the undergraduate research assistants who helped with initial coding and cleaning of the data: Madeline Erdell, Courtney Gilman, and Delaney Knipstein.

Author Contribution A.A. and N.L. were involved in data collection, cleaning, and analysis for the study. All authors were involved in writing and reviewing the manuscript.

Data Availability The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data are not available.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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