

What Should Matter in College Admissions: A Comparison of White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian Opinion

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UNTIL
APRIL 6, 2022

Center for Equal Opportunity



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Executive Summary

Public opinion polls show Americans rejecting racial preferences in college admissions, but these polls typically report on the public as a whole. And when reporting by race, the subsamples of racial/ethnic groups are relatively small (typically 200 blacks, fewer Hispanics, and almost no Asians).

In 2019, the Pew Research Center specially designed a survey covering racial and ethnic issues, with significantly larger subsamples, of roughly 3,000 whites, 1,500 blacks, 1,600 Hispanics, and 300 Asians.

The size of the subsamples allowed for analyses comparing responses among groups. As part of the survey, Pew asked about college admissions: whether certain factors should be a major factor, a minor factor, or not considered at all. Pew has made the race/ethnicity dataset and related materials publicly available. My statistical analysis is from this dataset and compares the responses of whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians.

I found considerable consensus among racial groups regarding the most important factors in college admissions—academics.

- High school grades had the largest support within each racial/ethnic group.
 - 68% of whites, 63% of blacks, 67% of Hispanics, and 77% of Asians thought high school grades should be a major factor.
- Test scores came in second.
 - 47% of whites, 42% of blacks, 46% of Hispanics, and 66% of Asians thought it should be a major factor.
 - But 18% of blacks and 17% of Hispanics thought test scores should not be considered at all—roughly double the percentage of whites (9%) and Asians (8%) who felt the same.

There was significantly less support for the other factors.

- Most whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians thought community service should be some sort of factor (either major or minor). Compared to academics, however, a much smaller percentage in each group thought it should be a major factor (whites, 19%; blacks, 20%; Hispanics, 25%; and Asians, 37%).
- Roughly half of blacks and a majority of Hispanics and Asians thought being the first to attend college should be either a major or minor factor. In contrast, most whites (56%) did not think it should be a factor at all.
- Athletics as a factor was not popular. 61% of whites and 52% of blacks, along with a plurality of Hispanics (49%) and Asians (44%) thought it should not be considered at all.
- Having a legacy connection was even less popular than athletics. Large majorities from each group simply rejected legacy as a factor (whites, 73%; blacks, 61%; Hispanics, 59%; and Asians, 53%).

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Race and gender were the least popular factors.

- Significant majorities of every group thought that race should *not* be used as a factor at all in college admissions:
 - 78% of whites;
 - 62% of blacks;
 - 66% of Hispanics; and
 - 58% of Asians.
- Only 4% of whites, 18% of blacks, 11% of Hispanics, and 13% of Asians thought race should be a major factor.

- An even greater percentage rejected gender as a factor:
 - 86% of whites;
 - 72% of blacks;
 - 76% of Hispanics; and
 - 68% of Asians.
- Only 2% of whites, 11% of blacks, 9% of Hispanics, and 7% of Asians thought gender should be a major factor.

Introduction

If the public opinion polls are right, Americans do not like colleges using race as a factor in admissions. Nationally, Gallup asked Americans about college admissions, in 2003, 2006, 2013, and 2016 as to whether applicants should be admitted solely on merit, “even if that results in few minority students being admitted,” or consider race/ethnicity to promote diversity, “even if that means admitting some minority students who otherwise would not be admitted.”¹ Over the 13 years of asking this same question, more than two out of three Americans thought merit should be the sole consideration.

In a different survey (with *Inside Higher Ed*), Gallup in 2016 found that majorities thought that that high school grades and test results should be major factors. Only 9% said race should be a major factor, another 35% said it should be a minor factor while 63% said it should not be a factor at all. Gallup further broke down the results by race. 76% of whites favored merit in admissions; 22% said race/ethnicity. 61% of Hispanics favored merit; 29% said race. 50% of blacks favored merit; 44% favored race. Cross-racial comparisons relied on weighted sample of 2,036 adults, including 182 blacks, 195 Hispanics, and no Asians.²

In early 2019, Pew engaged in a much more extensive survey, specifically on issues related to race and ethnicity. Pew specifically designed this survey, ending up with 1,518 blacks, 1,574 Hispanics, and 332 Asians, along with 2,997 whites.³ Because of these large numbers, this dataset allows more statistical analyses comparing responses of whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians.

The survey asked numerous questions regarding attitudes on race and ethnicity and how the various groups interact. For example, the survey used a “feeling thermometer,” asking respondents to indicate how cold/warm they feel towards whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians, with feelings ranging from “0” (very cool) to “100” (very warm).⁴ Respondents were asked how often they interacted with different groups (e.g. daily, sometimes, rarely, never); what factors they thought helped or hurt Americans getting ahead; if Americans talked too little, too much, or enough about race; whether they were ever stopped by the police; whether they had been subjected to slurs or jokes, and many other questions.

¹ Gallup poll results and discussions are from Frank Newport, “The Harvard Affirmative Action Case and Public Opinion,” *Gallup*, October 22, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/243965/harvard-affirmative-action-case-public-opinion.aspx>; Frank Newport, “Most in U.S. Oppose Colleges Considering Race in Admissions,” *Gallup*, July 8, 2016. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/193508/oppose-colleges-considering-race-admissions.aspx>.

² See section on survey methods in Newport, “Most in U.S. Oppose Colleges Considering Race in Admissions.”

³ Pew Research Center “American Trends Panel Wave 43: Methodology Report.” Feb 8, 2019. The methodology report is part of the complete data file available for download. The dataset also included responses from “Other,” which included respondents who defined themselves as bi-racial or multi-racial. Hispanics were surveyed in English and Spanish. The Asian sample was surveyed in English only.

⁴ I statistically analyze the responses in a separate essay.

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Pew asked respondents what they thought about the eight academic, social, and demographic factors that went into college admissions. The question wording is below.⁵

Here are some factors colleges and universities may consider when making decisions about student admissions. Do you think each of the following should be a major factor, minor factor, or not a factor in college admissions?

- a. Race or ethnicity;
- b. Gender;
- c. Whether a relative attended the school;
- d. Athletic ability;
- e. Involvement in community service;
- f. Scores on standardized tests;
- g. High school grades; and
- h. Being the first in the family to go to college.

This report is based on the 2019 Pew dataset, focusing on Pew’s eight factors in college admissions and how respondents felt about each of them.⁶ I compare whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians on each of these factors, starting with the academic factors (grades and test scores), non-academic extracurriculars (community service and athletics), social mobility/social class considerations (first in college and legacy connections), and finally, race and gender.

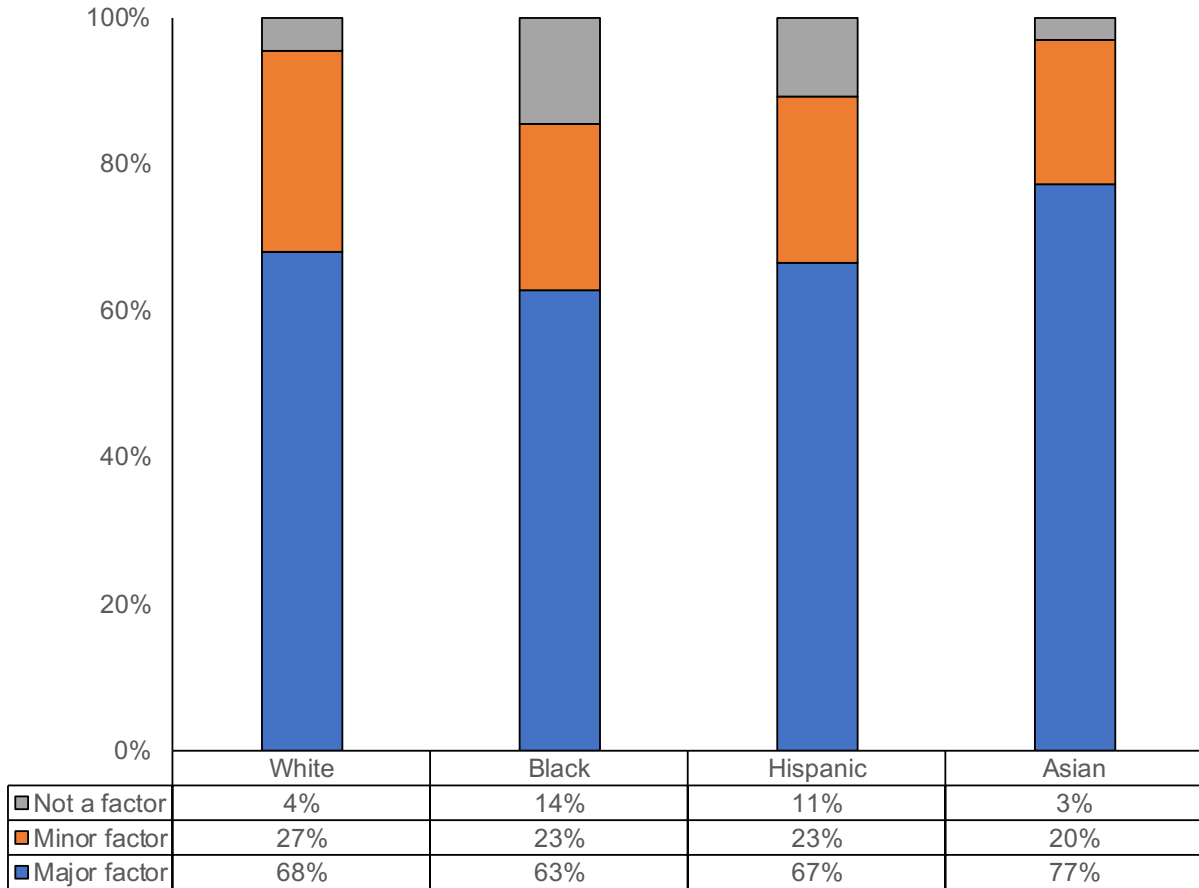
⁵ Pew Research Center, “American Trends Panel Wave 43 January, Final Topline,” ATP W43 Questionnaire, p.2 (part of downloaded dataset).

⁶ Pew has made the complete race/ethnicity dataset and relevant files available for downloading. Pew Research Center, “American Trends Panel, Wave 43: Download This Dataset.” January-February 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/dataset/american-trends-panel-wave-43/>

Academics: High School Grades and Test Scores

Respondents gave the greatest weight to grades and then to test scores.

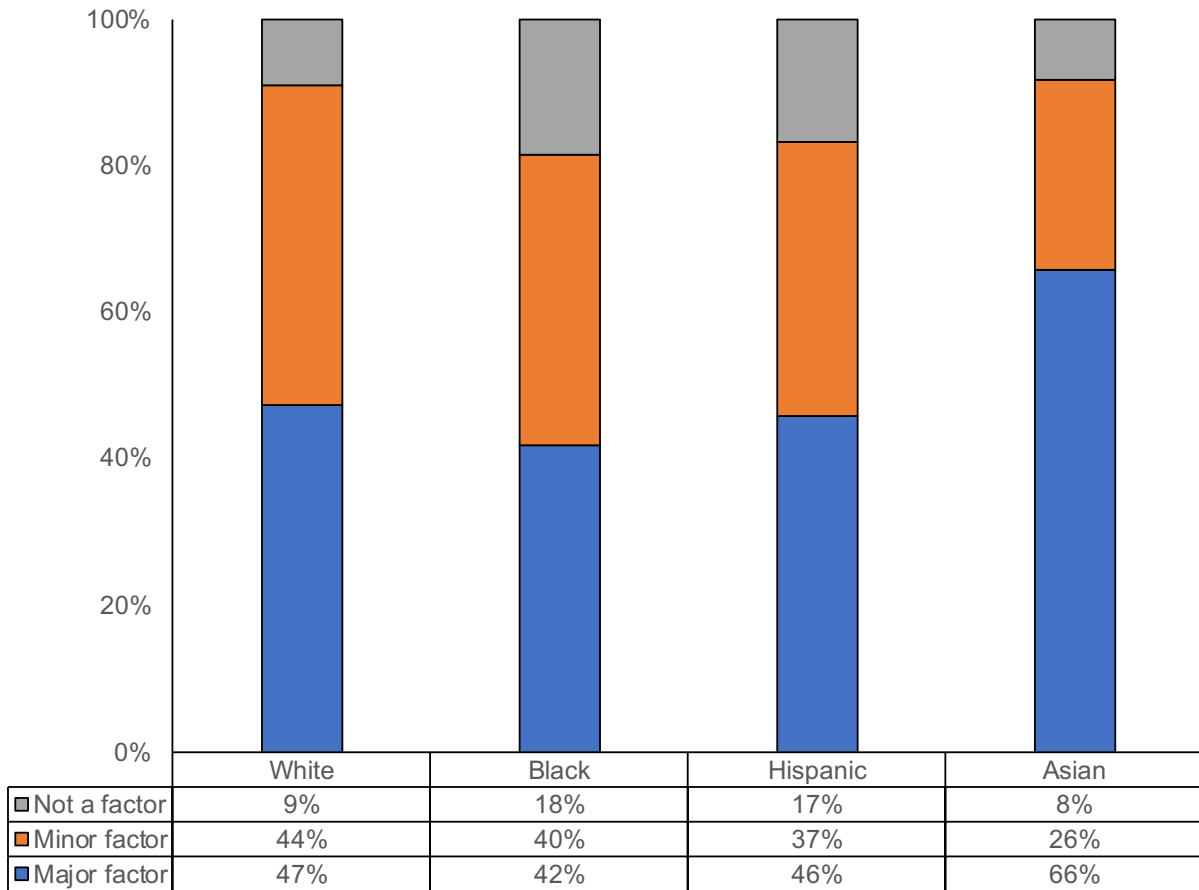
Figure 1 High School Grades



Large majorities thought high school grades should be a major consideration, and Asians were the most in favor.

- More than two in three whites and Hispanics, 63% of blacks, and 77% of Asians said grades should be a major factor.
- An additional 27% of whites, 23% of blacks, 23% of Hispanics, and one in five Asians thought high school grades should be a minor factor.
- While most respondents in each group thought that grades should be a factor, 14% of blacks and 11% of Hispanics thought high school grades should *not* be a factor—roughly three times the percentage of whites (4%) and Asians (3%) who felt the same.

Figure 2 Test Scores



Test scores were also favored, but not as much as grades.⁷

- Asians were the most in favor of it being a major factor (66%)—roughly twenty points higher than whites, Hispanics, and blacks who thought the same.
- A plurality of whites, blacks, and Hispanics (47%, 42%, and 46%, respectively) also thought test should be a major factor.
- 44% of whites and 40% of blacks wanted test scores to be just a minor factor, along with 37% of Hispanics, but only about one in four Asians.
- Significantly more blacks and Hispanics however felt test scores should not be considered at all. 18% of blacks and 17% of Hispanics thought test scores should not be a factor—approximately double the percentage of whites (9%) and Asians (8%) who felt the same.

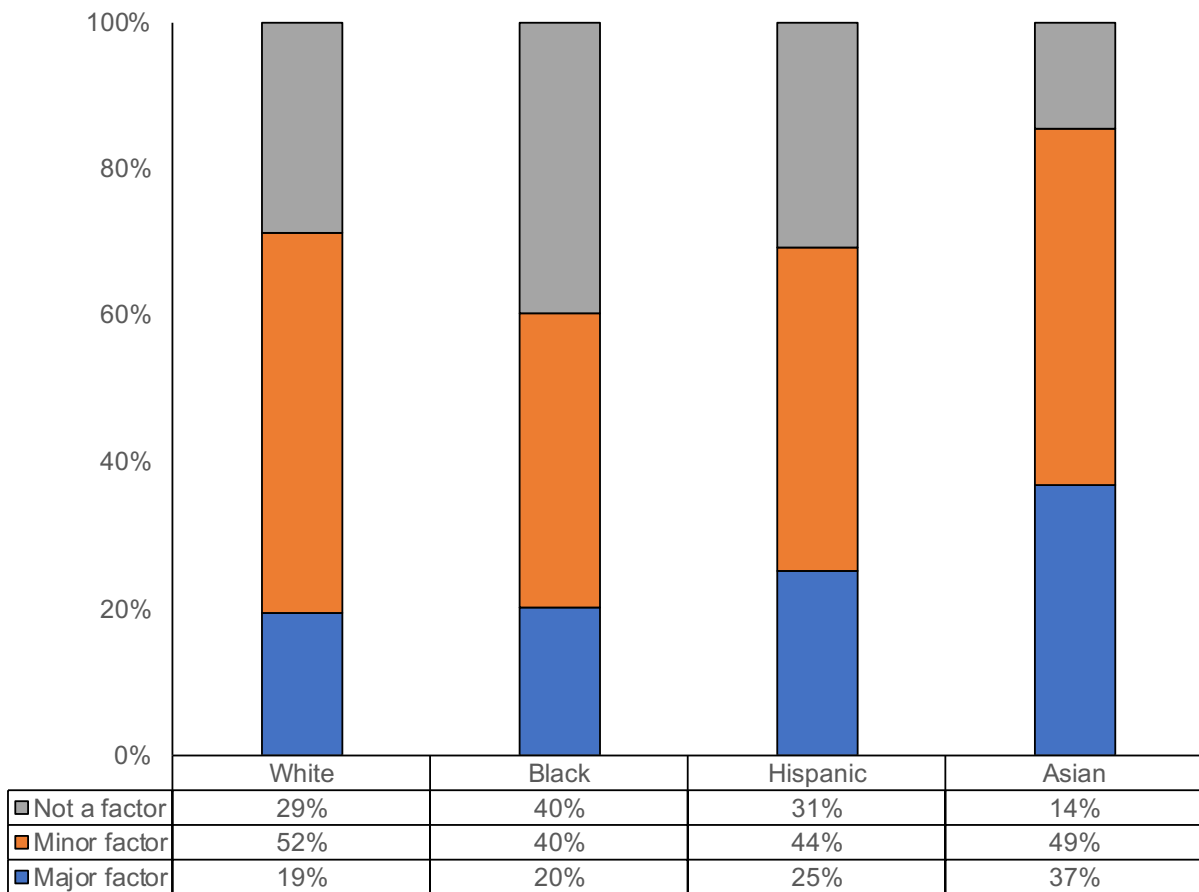
⁷ It should be noted that an increasing number of colleges were no longer making test scores a requirement for admissions, a trend that started before the pandemic. In 2021, there were more than 900 such schools, including NYU, the University of Chicago, and Harvard. Because of this, the public may come to think that test scores should no longer be required for college applicants. PrepScholar, “Test-Optional Colleges,” Sept 3, 2021. <https://blog.prepscholar.com/test-optional-colleges-list>; *New York Times*, “Harvard Extends Test-Optional Admissions Policy for Four Years.” Dec 16, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/16/us/harvard-admissions-act-sat.html>.

Non-Academic Considerations: Extra-Curricular Activities and Athletics

Respondents were also willing to consider non-academic extra-curricular activities, but to a lesser degree compared to grades and test scores.

Many however felt that community service and athletics should not be considered at all.

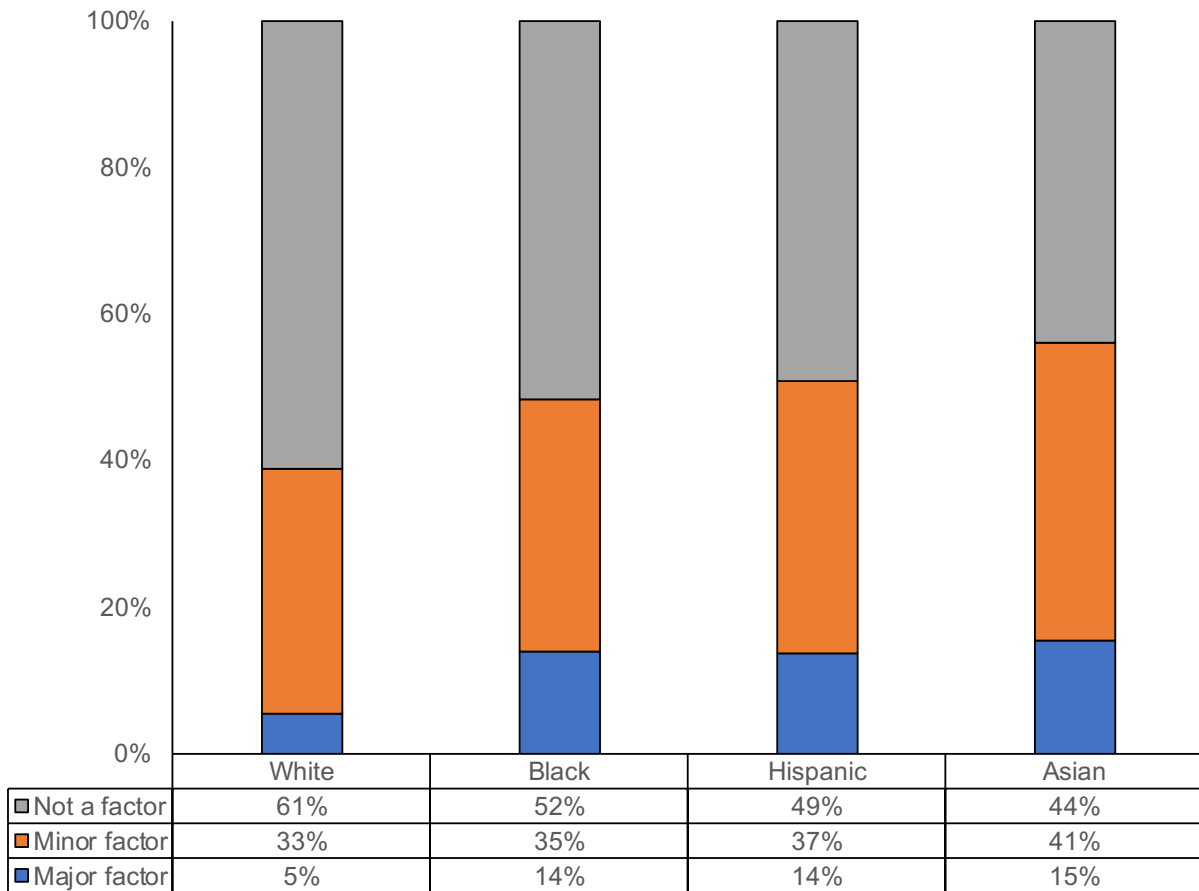
Figure 3 Community Service



Compared to academics, fewer respondents thought community service should be considered in admissions. At best, many thought it should be a minor factor.

- Whites were the most in favor of community service as a minor factor (52%), along with a plurality of blacks (40%), Hispanics (44%), and Asians (49%).
- Many said that community service should *not* be considered at all, most of all among black respondents (40%). This was significantly greater than the 29% of whites, 31% of Hispanics, and 14% of Asians who thought the same.

Figure 4 Athletics



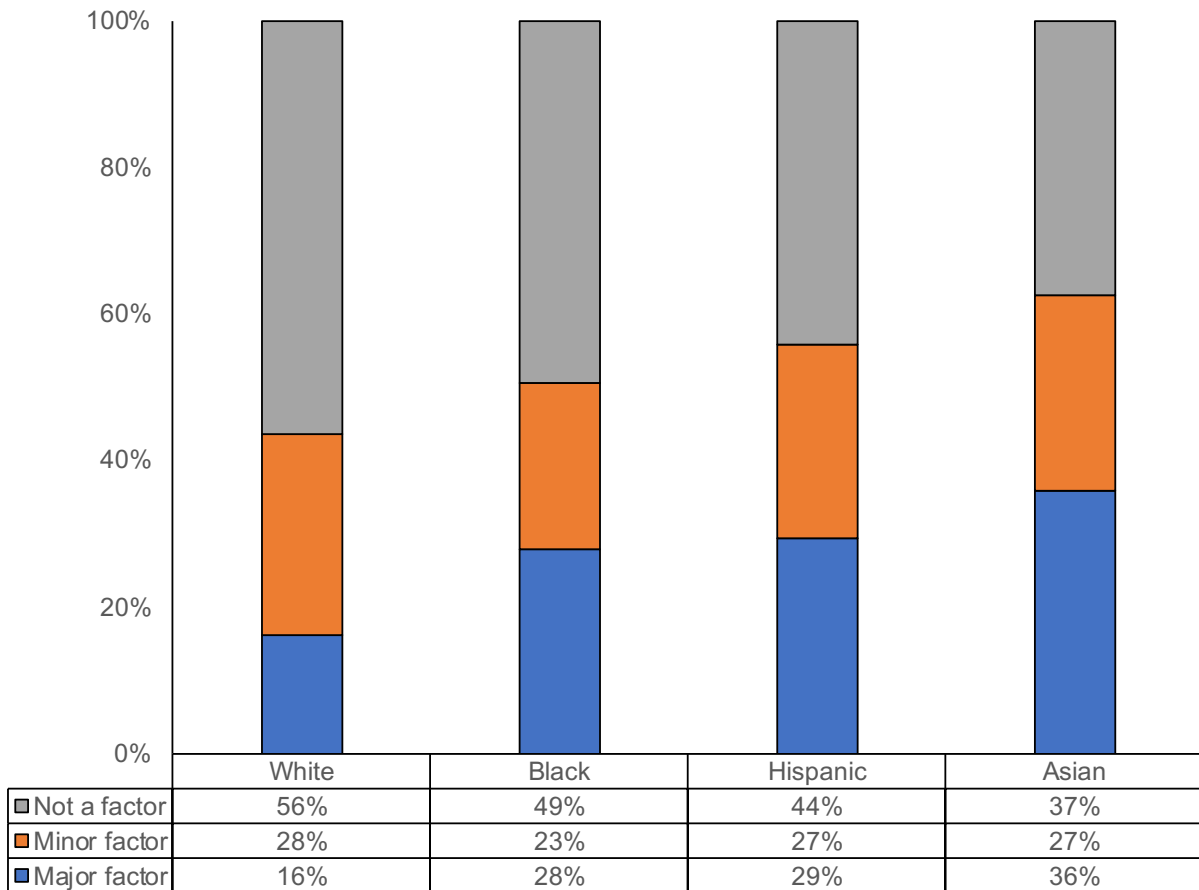
Even more respondents rejected athletics as an admissions factor.

- A majority of whites (61%) and blacks (52%) thought that athletics should *not* be a factor, along with 49% of Hispanics and a plurality of Asians.
- Roughly one in three whites and blacks, 37% of Hispanics, and 41% of Asians thought athletics should be a minor consideration.
- Very few wanted athletics to be a major factor in admissions: 5% of whites, 14% of blacks and Hispanics, and 15% of Asians.

Social Mobility/Social Class

The next section examines two factors that reflect social mobility and social class in America. The first, “first in the family to attend college,” taps into a desire for social mobility from lower middle class or lower-class background. The second factor discussed below is “legacy connection,” tapping into Americans’ feelings towards upper class college connections. Both factors are connected to Americans’ idea of college as a gate-keeper to social mobility.

Figure 5 First in Family to Attend College

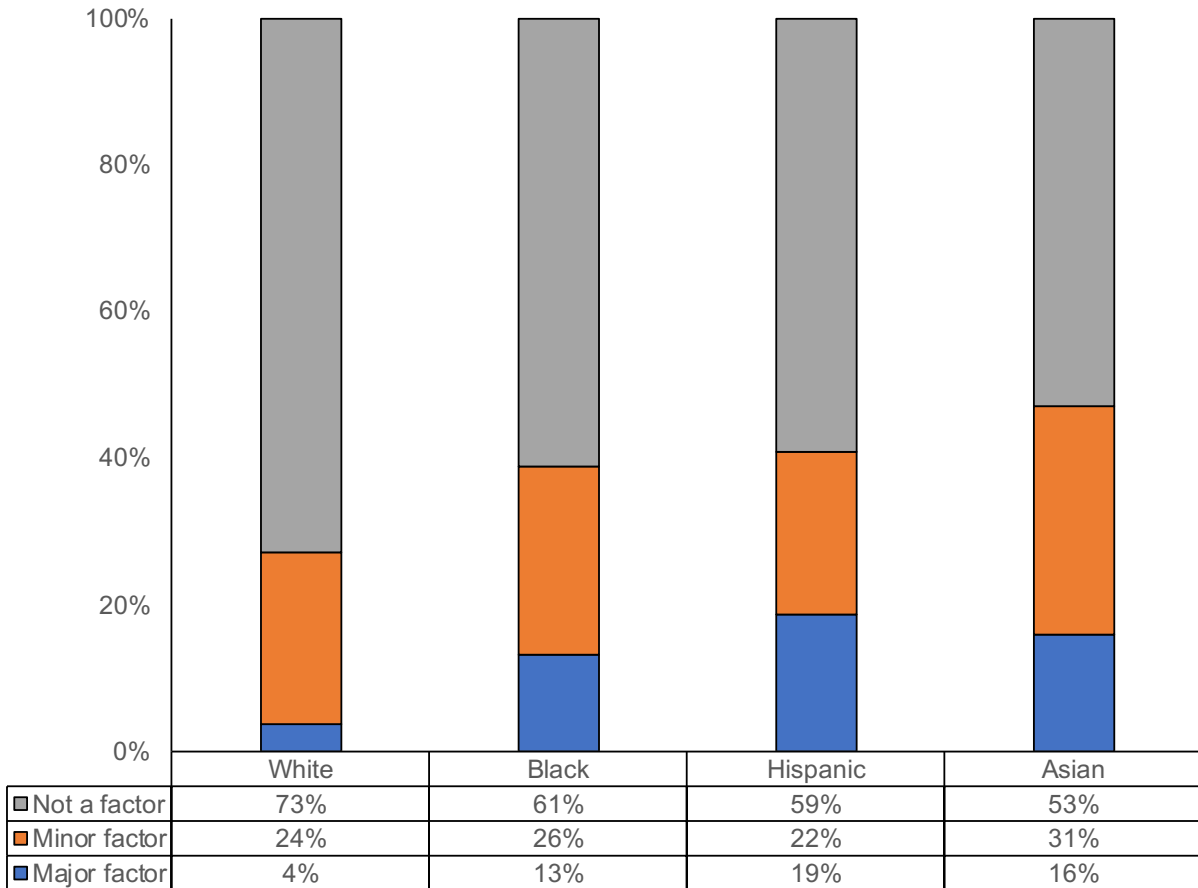


Opinion on being the first in the family to go to college was more divided than opinion on the academics, extracurriculars, and athletics.

- More than four in ten whites and a majority of blacks, Hispanics and Asians thought that “first in family” should be considered either as a major or minor factor.
 - Only 16% of whites thought it should be a major factor. Proportionately more blacks, Hispanics, and Asians felt similarly (28% of blacks, 29%, and 36% of Asians).
 - Another 28% of whites thought it should be a minor factor, as did 23% of blacks, 27% of Hispanics and 27% of Asians.

- A majority of whites however thought the notion of being the first in family should *not* be a factor at all (56%). So did a large plurality of blacks (49%) and Hispanics (44%), and a slight plurality of Asians (37%).

Figure 6 Legacy Connection



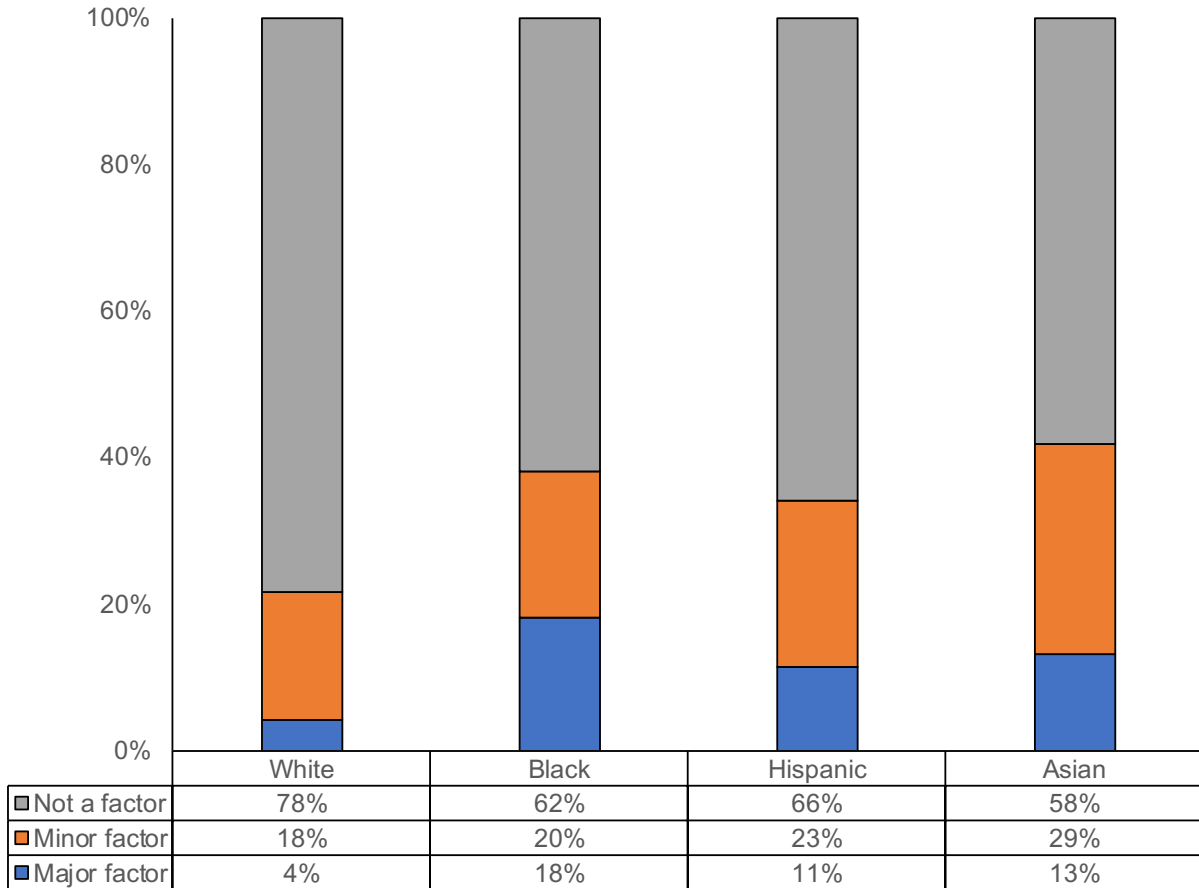
Having a legacy connection was rejected by a significant majority of Asians, blacks, Hispanics, and especially by whites.

- 73% of white respondents felt legacy connections should *not* be a factor—more than ten points larger than the majority of blacks (61%) and Hispanics (59%) who felt the same.
- 53% of Asians also rejected legacy connections as a factor—proportionately fewer than blacks, Hispanics, and especially whites.
- 31% of Asians did think legacy connections should be a minor factor. This too was larger when compared to 24% of whites, 26% of blacks, and 22% of Hispanics.

For most groups, legacy connections are unpopular. The only factor as unpopular was race; the only factor more unpopular was gender. I analyze race, then gender, in the next section.

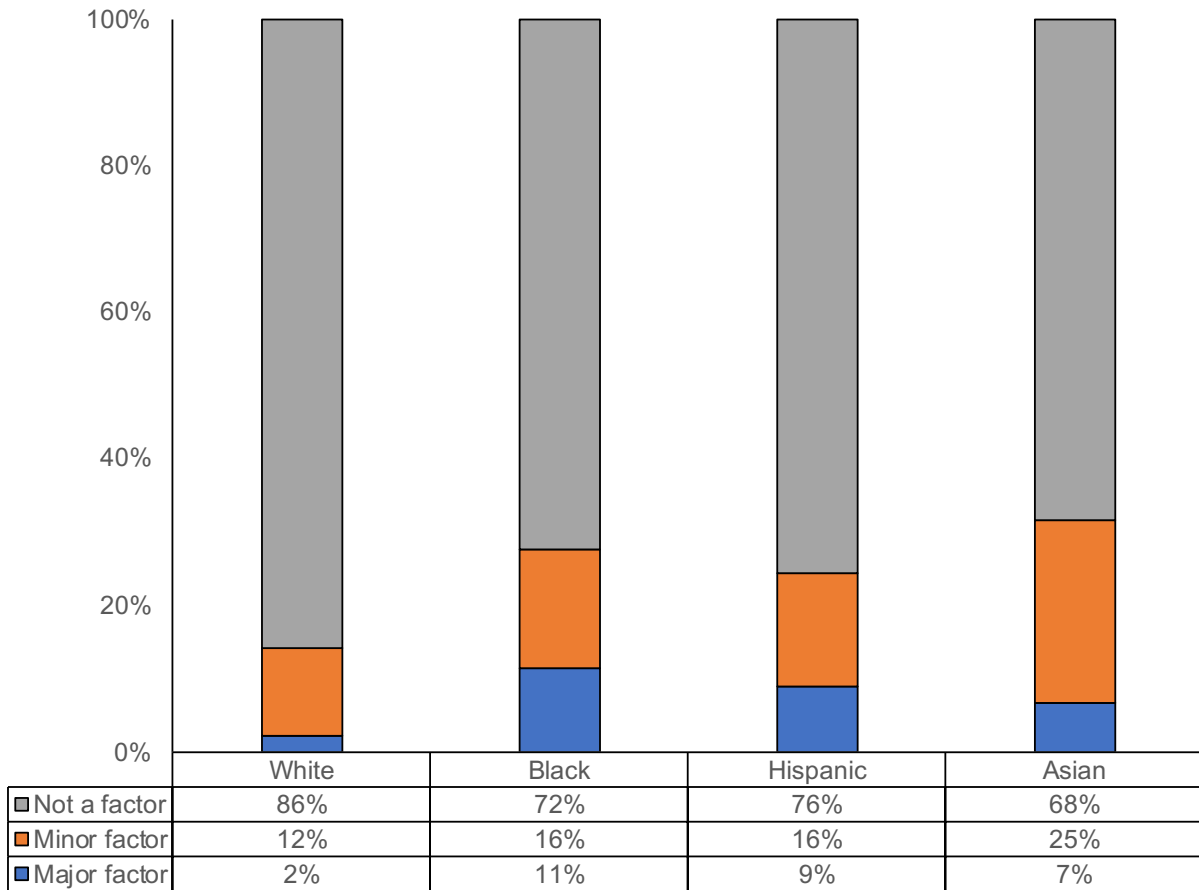
Race and Gender

Figure 7 Race



- Whites were the least supportive of race as a factor. More than three in four whites said race should *not* be a factor in college admissions.
- More than six in ten blacks (62%) also rejected race as a factor, as did two out of three Hispanics and 58% of Asians.
- Black respondents were the most likely to favor race. 18% of blacks thought it should be a major factor, compared to 11% of Hispanics, 13% of Asians, and 4% of whites.

Figure 8 Gender



Gender was the least favored factor, generating the largest “Not a Factor” response for all groups, and significantly more so than race, legacy, athletics, and the rest.

- 86% of whites said gender should not be a factor, as did 72% of blacks, 76% of Hispanics, and 68% of Asians.

Summary: How the Factors Compare

There is significant consensus as to what's important regarding college admissions. The largest support within each group was the use of academics as major factors in college admissions.

- This was especially true of relying on high school grades. High school grades ranked first in terms of support as a major factor.
- Test scores were supported by smaller percentages, but test scores still came in second as a major factor.
- Asians were the largest supporters of academics. They supported grades by ten or more points and by roughly 20 points or more for test scores compared to the others.

All other considerations had much less support.

- Most whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians thought community service should be a factor (either major or minor). Compared to academics, however, a much smaller percentage in each group thought it should be a major factor.
- Most blacks, Hispanics, and Asians also thought being the first to attend college should be a factor. But like community service, there was significantly less support for it as a major factor compared to academics. Most whites did not think it should be a factor.
- Athletics as a factor was not popular, but more minorities looked upon it favorably compared to whites. Most whites and blacks and a plurality of Hispanics and Asians thought that athletics should not be considered at all. Very few whites (5%) said it should be a major factor, compared to 14% of blacks, 14% of Hispanics, an 15% of Asians.
- Having a legacy connection was even less popular than athletics. Here too blacks, Hispanics, and Asians were somewhat more inclined to treat legacy as a factor (major or minor) compared to whites, although large majorities from each group simply rejected legacy as a factor.

Respondents were the least supportive of race and gender as considerations.

- Large majorities of each group said that race should not be a factor, major or minor.
- Proportionately more whites (78%) said it should not be a factor, but a large percentage of blacks, Hispanics, and Asians also felt the same.
- Almost one in five black respondents favored race as a major factor, as did 11% of Hispanics and 13% of Asians. Only 4% of whites thought the same.
- Gender was rejected by proportionately more respondents than any other factor.
- More than eight in ten whites, more than seven in ten blacks and Hispanics, and roughly two in three Asians said gender should not be a factor.
- One in ten blacks and Hispanics thought gender should be a major consideration, along with 7% of Asians but only 2% of whites.

In short, there is significant consensus as to what is and is not important regarding college admissions.

What does this mean in terms of policy? There's reason to suspect that these public opinion polls actually *understate* how much Americans reject race and gender being used as factors in the

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allocation of benefits and burdens. Witness the example of California's Proposition 16. On the California ballot, Prop. 16, if passed, would have allowed use of race and gender in government hiring, promotion, contracting, and higher education. Most California polls showed Prop 16 losing; a few polls showed it winning. Prop. 16 was defeated by even greater margins than predicted by the polls (and despite President Joseph Biden's huge win in California as a candidate sympathetic to race and gender classifications).⁸

There is little reason to think that the American public, if given the choice, would act any differently than California voters. Racial preferences in college admissions are not popular.

⁸ 57% voted No on Prop 16, 43% voted Yes, in a state that Biden won (64% to 34%). Washington Post, Election 2020: California, Final Results, December 12, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/elections/election-results/california-2020/>.



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