

Diversity in Education: The U.S. Supreme Court Got It Wrong

Ryan Downs¹ and Jershon Eagar[#]

¹BASIS Goodyear, USA

[#]Advisor

ABSTRACT

Diversity has repeatedly been shown to be a vital part of education. This paper explores the benefits and importance of diversity in education and presents studies and supporting research. In the case *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, the United States Supreme Court found that race-based affirmative action in college admissions is unconstitutional because it violates the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, which prohibits discrimination based on race. As colleges and universities are trying to be more inclusive and varied, the Supreme Court's finding just made it more difficult for colleges to secure a diverse population which will hurt education and likely lead to an adverse outcome for society. Diversity has many important benefits and is especially advantageous in education. Diversity increases creativity, critical thinking, helps reduce achievement gaps, and improves academic performance, student motivation, and intellectual engagement. Increasing diversity can increase empathy, appreciation of other cultures, and can help create a sense of community on campus. It can also help create inclusive attitudes and respect for others, can aid in removing biases and stereotypes, and can help prepare students for careers in an increasingly interconnected world. When weighing the benefits of diversity against what is actually written in the law, it seems the 2023 U.S. Supreme Court made the wrong decision.

Introduction

Education is an important part of the foundation of modern societies and it plays a critical role in shaping future generations. Diversity should be a key component of that education because it can significantly enhance the effectiveness and value of what students learn. Diversity in education refers to the inclusion and representation of people from various cultural, racial, ethnic, gender, religious, socioeconomic, and other backgrounds, within the educational system. It encompasses the acknowledgment and appreciation of the differences among people as well as the recognition of the unique perspectives and experiences they bring to the learning environment. It strives to create an inclusive and equitable learning environment that cultivates a culture of respect and empathy where individual differences are valued. Diversity in education can yield numerous benefits for students, teachers, and society as a whole and these include a wide array of advantages ranging from greater respect for other cultures to better preparation to enter the workforce.

Considering whether colleges should consider race or ethnicity as part of the admissions process has been debated for decades. In the recent June 29, 2023 ruling *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, the United States Supreme Court found that race-based affirmative action in college admissions violates the Fourteenth Amendment. Affirmative action has been the law for over half a century and it was put in place to stop states from discriminating against minorities. In more recent years however, affirmative action and similar restrictions have been banned in admissions at public colleges and universities including Arizona, California, Florida, Idaho, Michigan, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, and Washington. In states that have elimi-

nated affirmative action, studies have consistently found significant declines in college enrollment of underserved minority groups, which has substantially decreased racial and ethnic diversity. When Michigan voters passed the 2006 ban on affirmative action, black undergraduate enrollment at the University of Michigan dropped to almost half from 7% in 2006 to 4% in 2021. At the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), black students made up 7% of the student body before the 1996 ban. In 2006, the incoming freshman class was made up of less than 2% black students (1). Evidence shows that diversity in education improves learning outcomes for higher education students. A ban on affirmative action at colleges and universities would prevent minority and non-minority students from gaining a wide array of benefits of having a diverse class (2).

I hypothesize that the Supreme Court of the United States just made it more difficult for colleges to create and keep a diverse campus population, causing what will likely become an inferior educational experience. When one looks at the research on the benefits of diversity in education, my hypothesis seems to be self-evident. The court just put up a roadblock to campus diversity, making a varied and vibrant campus a more challenging endeavor in the future.

Method

I referenced over twenty published independent studies on diversity to learn of its significance and effects on students and education in the United States. I read the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*. I compared and contrasted the literature and studies versus the court's findings.

Results

I found that the benefits of affirmative action on college campuses outweigh the claimed harm of the use of equal opportunity in college admissions. It is widely recognized that having a diverse population in education is beneficial for many reasons. Diversity improves critical thinking, increases creativity, helps with problem solving, and improves academic performance. It also positively influences student motivation and intellectual engagement, helps reduce achievement gaps, increases cultural empathy and appreciation of other cultures, and increases a sense of community on campus. Diversity can also help remove biases and stereotypes, create inclusive attitudes and respect for others, and help students achieve a more global understanding to prepare for careers in the future.

Discussion

Diversity in education has become increasingly important in colleges in recent years. When students interact with others who are different from themselves it helps to lessen misconceptions and prejudices and can cultivate acceptance that fosters a feeling of belonging. Exposing students to a variety of unique individuals and cultures helps them succeed and learn how to better relate to people on a global scale. Embracing diversity in education has numerous benefits not only for those in an educational setting but also positively impacts society as a whole by fostering inclusivity, understanding, and a more interconnected world. The benefits of diversity are broad and well documented and should be supported and promoted.

One of the benefits of diversity in education that has been supported by several studies is enhanced critical thinking. Critical thinking is at the center of learning because it allows students to reflect on and comprehend their perspectives which aids students in trying to help understand the world around them. Critical thinking is important because it allows people to be more adaptable and leads to better decision making. The better people are at critical thinking, the better they can deal with difficult problems and situations in their daily

lives (3). A study which highlights the positive relationship between diversity and critical thinking is the research conducted by Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin (2002). The study involved a diverse sample of undergraduate students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds attending various colleges across the United States. The findings revealed that students who were exposed to greater diversity in their learning environment exhibited higher levels of critical thinking skills compared to those in less diverse settings. The researchers attributed this to the fact that interacting with individuals from different backgrounds challenged student assumptions and prompted them to evaluate their own beliefs (4). Data from a study by Chang, Sharkness, Hurtado, and Newman (2014) revealed that students who had exposure to diverse experiences, such as interacting with individuals from diverse backgrounds, participating in multicultural courses, and engaging in cross-cultural discussions, demonstrated higher levels of critical thinking compared to their peers. The study suggested that diversity experiences expanded their perspectives and influenced them to consider multiple viewpoints before reaching conclusions. The study also found that the positive effects of diversity on critical thinking were most pronounced when students engaged in meaningful and civil interactions with individuals from diverse backgrounds (5). These findings reinforce the role of diversity in promoting critical thinking skills by fostering intellectual curiosity, open-mindedness, and the ability to evaluate information from different perspectives.

Another benefit of diversity in education is the impact on analytical abilities. Phillips and Gully (1997) examined the correlation between diversity and problem-solving performance within work teams made up of individuals with varying demographic characteristics, such as gender, age, and educational background. The results revealed that teams with higher demographic diversity exhibited superior analytical abilities compared to more homogeneous teams. The diverse teams were more capable of coming up with creative solutions and alternative perspectives and were better at successfully tackling complex tasks (6). Mannix and Neale (2005) explored the impact of diversity on critical thinking performance when people were divided into homogeneous and heterogeneous teams. Homogeneous teams consisted of individuals with similar backgrounds, while heterogeneous teams included individuals with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. The findings revealed that heterogeneous teams performed better than homogeneous teams when it came to accuracy and effectiveness in solving problems. When individuals with diverse perspectives come together, they bring a mixture of insights, experiences, and investigative techniques which stimulates productive debates and helps avoid groupthink. By considering various viewpoints and challenging assumptions, diverse teams can explore a wider range of possibilities, identify potential areas of weakness, and arrive at more comprehensive and effective solutions (7).

Increased creativity is often the result when people from different backgrounds come together to collaborate. Hong and Page (2004) conducted experiments on homogeneous and heterogeneous groups and the impact diversity had on creative decision-making. The findings revealed that the heterogeneous groups outperformed the homogeneous groups in terms of generating creative ideas and innovative solutions. The study suggested that diversity stimulates thinking by introducing new perspectives, experiences, and knowledge into group discussions, leading to more original investigative approaches. When individuals from different backgrounds collaborate, they bring a range of unique skills, insights, and ideas that can complement and strengthen one another. The study emphasized that diversity promotes a climate of intellectual stimulation and encourages individuals to think outside the box, consider unusual approaches, and embrace varying viewpoints (8). A study by Homan, Buengeler, Eckhoff, van Ginkel, and Voelpel (2015) examined the relationship between team diversity and creative problem-solving based around diverse work teams across different industries. The study suggested that the presence of diverse viewpoints challenges traditional thinking, sparks new ideas, and promotes the ability to switch from one way of thinking to another. In addition, the study found that teams with higher diversity experienced more opinions and greater conflict within the group, which increased creativity. The researchers concluded that diversity facilitates dissimilar thinking and encourages individuals to consider alternative approaches, leading to more creative outcomes (9).

Diversity in education has been shown to have a positive impact on students in terms of their academic performance and growth. Findings by Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1998) indicated that students in diverse learning environments demonstrated higher levels of academic interest, critical thinking, and intellectual development compared to their peers in less diverse settings. The exposure to diverse views and experiences improved students' learning, expanded their understanding of subtle issues, and encouraged them to think analytically. The study also found that diverse learning environments fostered a sense of belonging and cultural competence among students, which positively influenced their self-esteem and academic performance (10). Cheryan, Plaut, Davies, and Steele (2009) found that students in more gender-diverse classrooms demonstrated higher levels of interest and active engagement. The presence of diverse peers challenged stereotypical beliefs and created a sense of acceptance for students who may have felt overlooked in less diverse environments. The study highlighted that exposure to diverse perspectives improved student confidence and the motivation to succeed. The researchers concluded that diversity enhances student motivation and engagement by creating an inclusive and nurturing environment that builds a sense of identity affirmation (11). Exposure to diverse perspectives and cultures fostered intellectual curiosity, challenged students' assumptions, and broadened their understanding of complicated issues. It further demonstrated that diverse learning environments provided students with opportunities to explore different ideas, engage in critical thinking, and develop a deeper sense of purpose and character. The idea that diversity experiences in a college setting increases intellectual enthusiasm is reinforced by research conducted by Gurin, Nagda, and Lopez (2004). Students exposed to diverse experiences, such as participating in cross-cultural interactions, taking multicultural courses, and engaging in discussions on social issues, demonstrated higher levels of intellectual interest compared to their peers (12).

A study titled "Recent Trends in Socioeconomic and Racial School Readiness Gaps at Kindergarten Entry" by Reardon and Portilla (2016) examined how diversity reduces achievement gaps between different groups of students. The findings revealed that schools with greater racial and socioeconomic diversity had smaller achievement gaps among students from different backgrounds. The suggestion was that exposure to diversity in the classroom created a more inclusive and fair learning environment, creating positive peer interactions and reducing the influence of socioeconomic disparities on academic achievement. Diverse classrooms provided opportunities for students to learn from each other, challenge stereotypes, and develop cross-cultural understanding, which ultimately narrowed achievement gaps (13). Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1998) also demonstrated how diversity can reduce gaps in achievement between different groups of students. The researchers analyzed 122 studies and found that cooperative learning, which emphasizes collaboration and interaction among students from diverse backgrounds, had a significant positive effect on student achievement, with larger benefits observed for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The study suggested that since cooperative learning promotes positive interdependence and equal participation among students, it helps to reduce achievement gaps by providing additional support and opportunities for students who might otherwise be at a disadvantage (14).

Having diversity in education can increase cultural respect, understanding, empathy, and appreciation of other cultures. Research conducted by Tropp and colleagues (2008) focused on the effect of racial diversity on attitudes between groups of college students and revealed that students in racially diverse environments reported a greater degree of cultural respect and empathy towards individuals from different racial backgrounds. By engaging with diverse peers, students developed a broader perspective and a deeper awareness for the cultural richness and diversity within their community (15). A study by Pettigrew and Tropp (2008) also suggested that direct contact with individuals from different cultural backgrounds challenged stereotypes and led to a greater respect for other cultures (16). Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin (2002) examined the effects of diversity on students' cultural understanding and appreciation. The findings revealed that engaging with people from diverse ethnic backgrounds allowed students to question their own assumptions, expand their worldview, and develop a more subtle appreciation of complex global challenges. Students who engaged with diverse peers

reported increased cultural empathy, open-mindedness, and a greater admiration for different cultures. The study concluded that increased cultural understanding fostered greater tolerance, respect, and harmonious interactions among students (17).

It is becoming increasingly important that people are prepared to work in a diverse world. More and more future careers will involve diverse workplaces and the ability to interact respectfully with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Roccas, CC, and Halevy (2002) examined student perceptions of non-group members and their communication skills among different cultures in a diverse university setting. The findings revealed that students who had more frequent and positive intergroup interactions displayed greater knowledge of global issues, more accurate perspectives on diverse cultures, and improved intercultural communication skills. Through these interactions, students acquired important skills for effective communication with other cultures, such as empathy, openness, and cultural sensitivity (18). Ely and Thomas (2001) examined the experiences of professionals in diverse work settings and the effects of those experiences on their career advancement and success. The findings revealed that these individuals demonstrated greater skill in communicating with other cultures, which enhanced their ability to navigate diverse workplaces effectively. Diversity experiences contributed to an individual's understanding of complex organizational dynamics, their ability to work in teams with diverse members, and their proficiency in addressing challenges and opportunities in global markets (19). Interactions with a variety of diverse people is important because when a student leaves school and moves onto a job, it is vital that they have already been exposed to a diverse group of people and thought so they can perform in their career with greater confidence and empathy for everyone they encounter.

Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) conducted a study on how diversity can diminish stereotypes and cultural bias. The findings consistently demonstrated that meaningful contact between groups led to reduced preconceptions and stereotypes about different social groups. When individuals have direct and purposeful interactions with members of diverse groups, they are more likely to question and overhaul their predetermined biases and stereotypes. Moreover, the research demonstrated that the effects of contact between various groups extend beyond individual attitudes and also impact societal norms and group relations. By generating appreciation and positive views towards different cultures and social groups, diversity plays a key role in dissolving conventionalization and cultural bias (20). Dovidio, Gaertner, and Saguy (2009) revealed how diversity reduces stereotypes and cultural bias at both the individual and group levels when there is positive and meaningful group contact. Interacting with individuals from various cultural backgrounds challenged stereotypes, gave opportunities for obtaining perspective, and promoted empathy and understanding (21). When these types of positive interactions reach beyond individuals and expand into society, it helps to change our world for the better.

Research conducted by Dovidio, Gaertner, and Kawakami (2003) supports the idea that diversity increases appreciation for individual differences and reduces discrimination. Their study examined the effects of cross-group contact on reducing bias and promoting better attitudes towards people from different social groups. The study suggested that positive and direct contact with individuals of varying backgrounds improved compassion and encouraged understanding. Additionally, the study expressed the importance of equality and cooperative activities during cross-group contact to form good intergroup attitudes. These findings stressed the life-changing potential of diversity in promoting appreciation for individual differences and combating discrimination by breaking down stereotypes and building inclusive attitudes (22). A 2022 survey taken of college students showed that the majority of students agreed that racial and ethnic diversity improved their social experience in college (Figure 1).

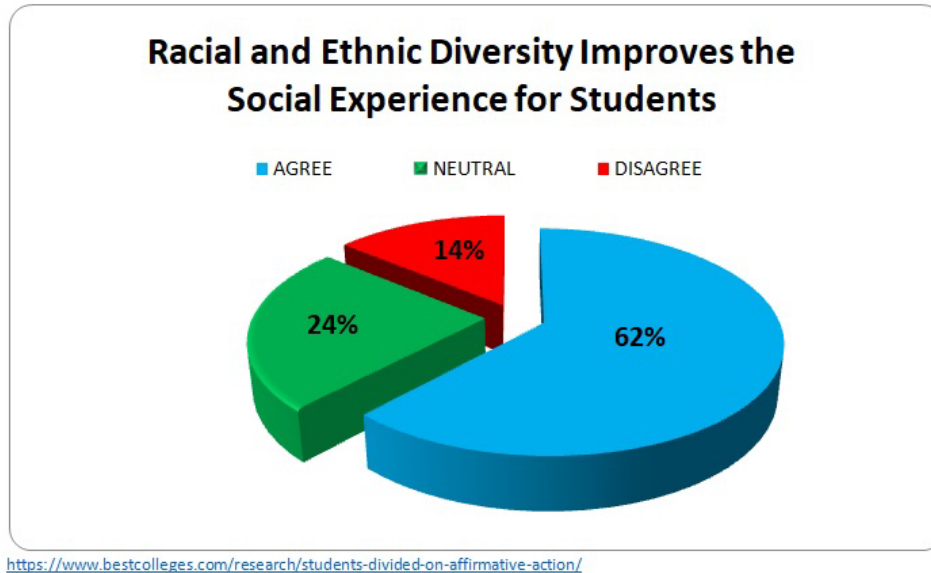


Figure 1. A 2022 BestColleges.com survey of college students showing their opinion regarding whether racial and ethnic diversity on college campus improves the social experience in college. Blue signifies agreement, green indicates neutral, and red represents disagreement.

Putnam (2007) examined the relationship between diversity and civic engagement in the study "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century." The data suggested that diverse communities tend to have greater levels of citizen participation. The study proposed several mechanisms through which diversity improves community engagement, including exposure to different views, enhanced problem-solving skills, and increased social networks. It pointed out that when individuals socialize with others from different backgrounds, they are exposed to a wider range of ideas, experiences, and values, which can stimulate public participation. The study also emphasizes that diversity induces individuals to confront and address societal challenges, promoting a sense of shared responsibility and encouraging a stronger commitment to community (23). People who participate in their community can benefit by boosting their skills, self-confidence, self-esteem, and life satisfaction while others benefit from the actions of citizens who volunteer or work to better their community.

In *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, the United States Supreme Court found that race-based affirmative action in college admissions violates the Fourteenth Amendment. Unfortunately, affirmative action has been banned for use in admissions at public colleges in nine states and this has caused a substantial reduction in racial and ethnic diversity at colleges. Studies have consistently found significant declines in college enrollment of underserved minority groups in these same states including, for example, at the University of Michigan, where black undergraduate enrollment dropped to almost half from 2006 to 2021 and at UCLA, where enrollment of black students in the incoming freshman class decreased by over 70% from 1996 to 2006. It seems likely that these examples foreshadow nationwide repercussions of banning affirmative action in college admissions. Studies show that diversity in education improves learning outcomes for higher education students and a ban on affirmative action at colleges and universities interferes with students being able to gain a wide variety of benefits from diversity experiences.

Embracing diversity in education is not just a popular phrase of the day; it is essential for a better society. By encouraging an inclusive educational environment, we encourage well-rounded, empathetic, and socially conscious individuals who are better prepared to contribute positively to a diverse and interconnected world. Diversity in education builds a more just and equitable society so that we can have a more harmonious

planet for future generations. Moving forward, we need to recognize the significance of diversity and actively work to create an inclusive educational system that elevates and empowers every student, regardless of their background.

Acknowledgments

I would like to give a special thank you to Dr. Eagar for mentoring me. I also want to thank Dr. Pierce and my mother and father for all of their support and encouragement.

References

1. Brenner, Sean. "How UCLA Has Responded to Proposition 209." *UCLA*, UCLA, 23 Aug. 2023, newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/how-ucla-has-responded-to-proposition-209.
2. Saul, Stephanie. "9 States Have Banned Affirmative Action. Here's What That Looks Like." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 31 Oct. 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/10/31/us/politics/affirmative-action-ban-states.html.
3. "Why Is Critical Thinking Important?" *FutureLearn*, 25 Oct. 2022, www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/how-to-develop-critical-thinking-skills/0/steps/335512.
4. Gurin, Patricia, et al. "Diversity and Higher Education: Theory and Impact on Educational Outcomes." *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 72, no. 3, 1 Sept. 2002, pp. 330–367, <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.72.3.01151786u134n051>.
5. Chang, Mitchell J., et al. "What Matters in College for Retaining Aspiring Scientists and Engineers from Underrepresented Racial Groups." *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, vol. 51, no. 5, 18 Feb. 2014, pp. 555–580, <https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.21146>.
6. Phillips, Jean M., and Stanley M. Gully. "Role of Goal Orientation, Ability, Need for Achievement, and Locus of Control in the Self-Efficacy and Goal--Setting Process." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 82, no. 5, Oct. 1997, pp. 792–802, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.82.5.792>.
7. Mannix, Elizabeth, and Margaret A. Neale. "What Differences Make a Difference? The Promise and Reality of Diverse Teams in Organizations." *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, vol. 6, no. 2, Oct. 2005, pp. 31–55, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1529-1006.2005.00022.x>.
8. Hong, Lu, and Scott E. Page. "Groups of Diverse Problem Solvers Can Outperform Groups of High-Ability Problem Solvers." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 101, no. 46, 8 Nov. 2004, pp. 16385–16389, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0403723101>.
9. Homan, Astrid C., et al. "The Interplay of Diversity Training and Diversity Beliefs on Team Creativity in Nationality Diverse Teams." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 100, no. 5, 2015, pp. 1456–1467, <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000013>.
10. Hurtado, Sylvia, Alma R Clayton-Pedersen, et al. "Enhancing Campus Climates for Racial/Ethnic Diversity: Educational Policy and Practice." *The Review of Higher Education*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1998, pp. 279–302, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.1998.0003>.
11. Cheryan, Sapna, et al. "Ambient Belonging: How Stereotypical Cues Impact Gender Participation in Computer Science." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 97, no. 6, 2009, pp. 1045–1060, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016239>.
12. Gurin, Patricia, Biren (Ratnesh) Nagda, et al. "The Benefits of Diversity in Education for Democratic Citizenship." *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 60, no. 1, 11 Feb. 2004, pp. 17–34, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-4537.2004.00097.x>.

13. Reardon, Sean F., and Ximena A. Portilla. "Recent Trends in Income, Racial, and Ethnic School Readiness Gaps at Kindergarten Entry." *AERA Open*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2016, p. 233285841665734, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858416657343>.
14. Johnson, David W., et al. "Cooperative Learning Returns to College What Evidence Is There That It Works?" *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, vol. 30, no. 4, July 1998, pp. 26–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091389809602629>.
15. Page-Gould, Elizabeth, et al. "With a Little Help from My Cross-Group Friend: Reducing Anxiety in Intergroup Contexts through Cross-Group Friendship." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 95, no. 5, 2008, pp. 1080–1094, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.95.5.1080>.
16. Pettigrew, Thomas F., and Linda R. Tropp. "How Does Intergroup Contact Reduce Prejudice? Meta-Analytic Tests of Three Mediators." *European Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 38, no. 6, 5 Mar. 2008, pp. 922–934, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.504>.
17. Gurin, Patricia, et al. "Diversity and Higher Education: Theory and Impact on Educational Outcomes." *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 72, no. 3, 1 Sept. 2002, pp. 330–367, <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.72.3.01151786u134n051>.
18. Roccas, Sonia, et al. "Toward a Unifying Model of Identification with Groups: Integrating Theoretical Perspectives." *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1 Aug. 2008, pp. 280–306, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868308319225>.
19. Ely, Robin J., and David A. Thomas. "Cultural Diversity at Work: The Effects of Diversity Perspectives on Work Group Processes and Outcomes." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 2, June 2001, pp. 229–273, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2667087>.
20. Pettigrew, Thomas F., and Linda R. Tropp. "A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 90, no. 5, 2006, pp. 751–783, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751>.
21. Dovidio, John F., Samuel L. Gaertner, and Tamar Saguy. "Commonality and the Complexity of 'We': Social Attitudes and Social Change." *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2009, pp. 3–20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868308326751>.
22. Dovidio, John F., et al. "Intergroup Contact: The Past, Present, and the Future." *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, vol. 6, no. 1, Jan. 2003, pp. 5–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430203006001009>.
23. Putnam, Robert D. "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century the 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture." *Scandinavian Political Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, June 2007, pp. 137–174, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9477.2007.00176.x>.