

## Talking Point C: Anti-Affirmative Action Forces and Their Use of “Civil Rights” Language

**Past and present civil rights leaders support affirmative action.** Jesse Jackson led several protests after the passage of California’s Proposition 209, and former Student Non-Violence Coordinating Committee (SNCC) chair Charles McDew calls conservatives’ use of civil rights language “absolute nonsense.”

**Not just in affirmative action.** Conservatives have also called increased high-stakes testing and voucher programs—which hurt schools serving primarily low-income students of color—part of a “new civil rights movement.” Black conservative Howard Fuller compared the campaign for vouchers with a famous integration sit-in when he said in a 2001 keynote address: “Did we sit down at a lunch counter at Woolworth’s in Greensboro, NC, February 1, 1960, to arrive at another lunch counter today where we are welcome but can’t read the menu?”

**By co-opting the civil rights concept of racial equality, anti-affirmative action conservatives attempt to dissociate themselves from racism.** The outcomes promoted by the Civil Rights Movement and Ward Connerly’s American Civil Rights Institute are fundamentally opposed—one resulted in people of color having increased access to higher education and employment, and the other diminishes people of color’s access to higher education and employment.

**The use of the term “civil rights” tricks people** into thinking they are supporting racial justice. In Michigan, volunteers for the anti-affirmative action Michigan “Civil Rights” Initiative **lied to potential signers**, saying that the initiative was to save affirmative action. At its first hearing on the issue in Detroit, the Michigan Civil Rights Commission received more than 180 affidavits saying that petition collectors told potential signers that the proposal was for civil rights or in support of affirmative action. Polls conducted during California’s Proposition 209 showed that individuals who would have voted for Prop 209 as the “California Civil Rights Initiative” would not have voted in favor of a proposition to end affirmative action. After the state of Texas ended affirmative action, again using the language of civil rights, voters in the city of Houston protected affirmative action when it was named in the text of the initiative. The current initiative to be voted on in Michigan in November is also called the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative.

**By calling affirmative action “preferential” or “special” treatment,** critics of affirmative action ignore the fact that no one climbs the ladder of opportunity alone, and that many white and wealthy Americans receive a variety of formal and informal benefits that assist them in their journeys to quality higher education or well-paying jobs