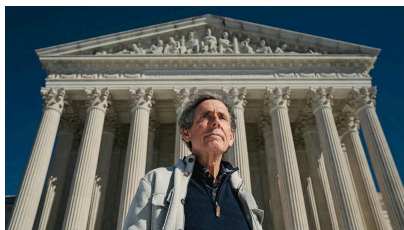


Edward Blum has new allies in his fight against affirmative action



The campaigner has battled race-conscious policy for decades. Now his time has come

If nothing is so powerful as an idea whose time has come, it is also true that ideas merchants can wait aeons for that moment. Even those eventually hailed as prophets risk being dismissed as cranks. Edward Blum has courted such disdain in the decades he has dedicated to opposing race-conscious policies in America. “I’m a one-trick pony,” he says of his mission.

Mr Blum’s story is a parable of America’s evolving debate on diversity. Over the years he won court battles over universities and voting rules. Heather Mac Donald, a conservative campaigner, recently said he “has done more to eradicate racial preferences from our body politic than any other human being alive today”. He has also faced setbacks and criticism. Now the federal government has joined his cause with a vengeance. Mr Blum’s time has come.

He is not a lawyer, though on civil-rights issues “he might as well be,” says Adam Mortara, who has pleaded some of his cases. Mr Blum grew up in a liberal Jewish household in Texas but moved right in the 1980s (he was “the first Republican my mother ever met”). Since no Republican was running in his district, he stood for Congress in Houston in 1992. He lost—but, after hiring a real-estate lawyer from Louisiana, challenged what he saw as the racial gerrymandering of Texan districts. The Supreme Court struck them down.

So began a legal crusade, by turns quixotic and triumphant, which, says Wendy Weiser of the Brennan Centre for Justice, a think-tank, “has had a significant impact on the law and on our culture”. Mr Blum likens his role to that of Yente, the matchmaker in “Fiddler on the Roof”. Perceiving an injustice, he finds suitable plaintiffs, willing lawyers and donors to pay them.

His next big win came in 2013. He orchestrated a challenge to the parts of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that obliged states with records of racial discrimination to clear election-rule changes with the government or a federal court. Since America had “changed dramatically”, ruled the Supreme Court, those bits of the act were outdated. A rush of new regulations followed (on voter-ID and the like); the gap between black and white turnout has since widened, reports Ms Weiser, especially in places affected by the judgment.

But Mr Blum’s most spectacular coup came in 2023. For 15 years he contested the use of race in college admissions, first pursuing his alma mater, the University of Texas, then, through a group called Students for Fair Admissions, going after Harvard and the University of North Carolina for allegedly discriminating against Asian-Americans. Ruling on those cases, the Supreme Court nixed affirmative action by universities. It is hard to disentangle the effects of these decisions from those of other measures, but overall, predicts Bryan Cook of the Urban Institute, a think-tank, campuses will become less diverse.

[This campaign has had personal costs. In the 1990s Mr Blum tried (and failed) to get the city of Houston to ditch affirmative action; his employers, he recalls, forced him to choose between his investment job and his activism. In the past few years he has received a dozen death threats, he says, along with umpteen allegations of racism, abuse often tinged with antisemitism.

He isn’t a racist, maintains Mr Mortara, noting that “he’s probably been hugged by 10,000 Chinese moms.” For all his steely patience, Mr Blum is nobody’s idea of a fanatic. Even courtroom adversaries acknowledge his winsome civility. One serial opponent, Jon Greenbaum, calls him “soft-spoken” and “even-keeled”. Mr Mortara says he “has not an ounce of malice in his heart”, but rather “passionately believes in the ethos of colour-blindness”.]

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