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Can the Meritocracy Survive Without the SAT?

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The rapid abandonment of the SAT and ACT as requirements for college admissions, to the point where more than 80 percent of four-year colleges didn't require a standardized test for admission in the coming fall, is a milestone in the history of the modern meritocracy. What remains to be seen is whether it's a marker on the road to the meritocracy's demise.

From the beginning meritocratic culture and standardized testing have been inextricably intertwined. The transformation of America's elite colleges in the middle of the 20th century, from upper-class finishing schools into modern "multiversities" supposedly open to all comers, was driven and justified by the SAT, which was supposed to provide an equal-opportunity means of ascent and legitimate the new elite with numerical evidence of its brainpower.

For a long time meritocracy's skeptics, left and right, have noted that the new system created an upper class that seems as privileged and insular as the old one. And according to some of the SAT's critics, it's precisely this criticism that's motivating the current shift away from standardized tests — the idea that they're inherently biased toward kids from well-off families and that a more holistic definition of merit will open more opportunities for the meritorious poor and middle class.

There are reasons to be doubtful of this account. First, it seems pretty clear that many schools are really ditching the SAT in response to the following sequence of events: Asian American SAT scores rose to the point where elite colleges were accused of discriminating against Asian American applicants to maintain the racial balance they desired, this led to lawsuits, and those lawsuits seem poised to yield a Supreme

Court ruling against affirmative action. So universities are pre-emptively abandoning a metric that might be used against them in future litigation, not for the sake of widening opportunity but just in the hopes of sustaining the admissions status quo.

Second, while SAT scores are linked to family income, the link is not as tight as critics sometimes suggest, and standardized tests are probably a less class-bound metric than many things that go into more "holistic" assessments. Lots of kids use the SAT or ACT to get a boost out of a bad school or prove themselves despite lacking a polished résumé, and there's little clear evidence that going test-optional increases racial diversity. Whereas the college essay (assuming it survives ChatGPT), the extracurricular-laden résumé, the right demeanor in the college interview — all of these seem more likely to be indicators of privilege than a raw score on a standardized test. So the children of the upper class could be beneficiaries of the SAT's decline, while children trying to climb could lose a crucial ladder.

The first point suggests a future where the diminishment of the SAT won't change all that much about the meritocracy. The second suggests a future where the meritocracy becomes even more privileged and insular — but over time, less associated with talent and intelligence, in a way that steadily undermines its legitimacy and influence.

The reason to expect the first, status-quo scenario is that elite colleges like the legitimation that comes with being seen as talent destinations, so even without a formal SAT requirement they'll still find a way to admit the kind of less-than-privileged kids who are currently boosted by standardized testing. As Matt Yglesias puts it, that search may make "admissions work a little bit more labor-intensive," but schools like Harvard "can easily afford to hire more admissions officers to scrutinize applications that lack a convenient summary test score."

The reason to wonder about the second scenario is that elite schools are also influenced by the ideological shifts within liberalism and the cultural shifts in young-adult life. And these forces push, in various ways, not just against the SAT but against all attempts to measure merit and demand excellence — with one push coming from students demanding higher grades and lower workloads, and another from ideological experiments like "equitable grading" and the progressive view that any measurement that reveals inequality must be perpetuating it.

In this environment, if the most famous benchmark of meritocracy is abandoned, not every school will necessarily devise complex heuristics that serve exactly the same purpose. Many may be content to just balance ethnic diversity with well-off students paying full tuition, coast on their reputations and let their standards slide a bit.

In which case you would have an elite-school population that's more privileged and less academically competitive and a larger population of smart kids from nonelite backgrounds who simply aren't recruited into the system anymore.

This combination might be good for America in the long run — fostering a greater regional dispersal of talent, breaking the meritocracy-versus-populism stalemate, weakening the influence of the Ivy League.

But it would represent the death of the meritocracy as we have known it, and old orders do not usually go down without a fight.

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