

Weaponizing Neutrality: Federal Policy and the Strategic Dismantling of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) in the United States

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Abstract

This article examines how claims of political neutrality are being strategically deployed to dismantle federal policies supporting Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) in the United States. Drawing on Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, and Critical Policy Discourse Analysis, it explores the legal and ideological foundations of DEIA, the historical evolution of bipartisan civil rights policy, and the growing partisan divide surrounding equity initiatives. Particular attention is given to the July 2025 Senate-passed version of the so-called “Big Beautiful Bill,” which reframes and restricts long-standing DEIA mandates under the guise of administrative efficiency and constitutional neutrality. The analysis reveals how neutrality rhetoric masks regressive objectives, undermines institutional protections for marginalized groups, and reorients federal governance toward exclusionary aims. The article concludes by assessing the long-term risks to democratic accountability, civil rights enforcement, and public education.

Keywords

DEIA policy, neutrality rhetoric, federal legislation, civil rights rollback, critical policy analysis

Introduction

The principles of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) have emerged from two foundational struggles in United States history: the women's rights movement and the Black civil rights movement. These efforts directly challenged long-standing legal and institutional exclusion, initiating a national discourse on systemic inequity. Their advocacy laid the groundwork for landmark civil rights legislation and institutional reforms, establishing the concept that equitable participation in democratic life requires more than the promise of formal equality (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1989).

Over the subsequent decades, the DEIA framework expanded through legislative acts, judicial rulings, and executive orders, extending protections and opportunities to additional historically marginalized groups, including individuals with disabilities and those identifying as LGBTQ+. These frameworks have influenced the development of inclusive hiring practices, diversified curricula, accessible support systems, and broader access to education and employment opportunities in both public and private sectors.

However, these principles are now subject to unprecedented political and ideological backlash. A coordinated effort is underway to delegitimize and dismantle DEIA policies, reframing them not as instruments of justice but as vehicles of partisan indoctrination. This agenda is most forcefully advanced by factions aligned with the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement and supported by legislative and judicial actors who have abandoned previous norms of institutional neutrality. Through executive orders, federal budget proposals, and new legislative initiatives, DEIA frameworks are being systematically targeted, constrained, or repealed under the guise of neutrality, fiscal discipline, or anti-discrimination reform.

This article examines the legal, historical, and discursive strategies employed in this dismantling effort. It evaluates how neutrality is weaponized to obscure the regressive intent behind these policy shifts and explores the broader implications for civil rights, democratic accountability, and equity in education, healthcare, employment, and public governance. In doing so, it traces the ideological lineage of contemporary opposition to DEIA. It critiques the transformation of federal policy into an instrument of exclusion cloaked in the language of fairness.

Historical and Conceptual Foundations of DEI

The roots of DEIA in American governance are embedded in the mid-20th century civil rights gains achieved through grassroots mobilization, judicial advocacy, and legislative reform. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, particularly Titles VI and VII, prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in both federally assisted programs and employment. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 extended these protections to gender in educational settings, while Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 introduced the legal recognition of disability rights. Together, these statutes laid the groundwork for institutional accountability across schools, workplaces, and public services.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) further expanded accessibility requirements, mandating reasonable accommodations and affirming the principle that equal opportunity necessitates structural change. Executive Orders such as 11246, signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, introduced affirmative action policies for federal contractors, establishing a precedent for proactive equity-based governance. Subsequent efforts, including Executive Order 13166 on language access and

the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), reinforced the notion that inclusion demands systemic support.

The feminist and LGBTQ+ rights movements also played critical roles in shaping DEIA principles. Legal milestones such as *Roe v. Wade* (1973), *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), and the expansion of hate crime legislation illustrated the evolving interpretation of civil rights to encompass gender and sexual identity. These legal developments were paralleled by institutional shifts toward equity frameworks within higher education, government agencies, and nonprofit sectors.

By the early 2000s, DEIA had become a standard component of federal grant programs, hiring protocols, educational assessment criteria, and compliance audits. It served not only as a corrective for past exclusion but as a proactive commitment to pluralism, access, and social justice. The framing of DEIA as a public good gained bipartisan acceptance in some contexts, despite persistent conservative critiques.

Yet even during this period of expansion, the seeds of resistance were being planted. Legal and political narratives began to challenge the constitutionality of affirmative action, question the legitimacy of targeted funding, and portray inclusion efforts as ideologically biased. These early criticisms laid the rhetorical and legal groundwork for the more aggressive dismantling campaigns seen today.

Legal and Executive Infrastructure Supporting DEI

The DEIA framework was constructed through a robust legal infrastructure designed to ensure compliance, enforce protections, and incentivize equity-oriented practices. At the federal level, this architecture combined civil rights statutes, regulatory frameworks, executive mandates, and judicial interpretations that collectively advanced anti-discrimination goals across sectors.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 remains the foundational statute underpinning DEIA enforcement. Title VI authorizes federal agencies to withhold funds from programs engaging in discriminatory practices, empowering oversight mechanisms within the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice. Title VII institutionalized Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) enforcement for workplace discrimination. These provisions were strengthened by the Equal Pay Act of 1963, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, and the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987, each expanding the scope and clarity of anti-discrimination law.

Title IX has been central to ensuring gender equity in education, and its application has broadened significantly since its inception. Judicial decisions and administrative rulemaking have clarified its relevance to sexual harassment, transgender student rights, and athletic program equity. Parallel efforts in disability rights, notably through the ADA and IDEA, embedded accessibility and accommodation requirements into both public infrastructure and pedagogical practices.

A series of executive orders reinforced these legislative gains. Executive Order 13583 (2011) mandated federal agencies to develop diversity and inclusion strategic plans. Executive Order 13985 (2021) required agencies to assess equity barriers and implement data-informed reforms, while Executive Order 14035 (2021) promoted inclusive workplace culture in the federal government. These orders established mechanisms for self-assessment, transparency, and public accountability.

Agency guidance, funding formulas, and reporting requirements operationalized these mandates. For example, the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights monitored compliance with Title VI, Title IX, and Section 504 through data collection and investigative authority. The Department of Labor linked federal contracting eligibility to nondiscriminatory practices, while Housing and Urban

Development incorporated equity assessments into grant competitions. Together, these administrative tools embedded DEIA principles into routine governance.

Judicial interpretations played a dual role in both expanding and limiting DEIA reach. Landmark cases such as *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) affirmed the constitutionality of race-conscious admissions in higher education, while *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013) narrowed protections under the Voting Rights Act. The courts became battlegrounds over the balance between equal protection and affirmative remedies, shaping the permissible boundaries of DEIA policy.

This legal and institutional infrastructure enabled DEIA to evolve from aspirational rhetoric into enforceable public policy. However, its reliance on executive discretion, administrative interpretation, and judicial precedent rendered it vulnerable to political shifts, legal challenges, and ideological reversal.

Theoretical Framework

This study applies three interrelated theoretical frameworks to examine the strategic dismantling of DEIA in the current political context: Critical Race Theory (CRT), Intersectionality, and Critical Policy Discourse Analysis (CPDA). Together, these frameworks offer a multidimensional lens to interrogate how race, power, and institutional discourse interact in shaping public policy.

Critical Race Theory provides the foundational premise that racism is not an aberration but a normalized feature of American institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT emphasizes that laws and policies often maintain racial hierarchies under the appearance of neutrality. In the context of DEIA rollbacks, CRT reveals how claims of colorblindness and meritocracy can function as mechanisms of exclusion, reinforcing existing privileges while obscuring systemic inequality.

Intersectionality, first conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), builds on CRT by highlighting how multiple, overlapping identities such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability produce unique modes of discrimination. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding the compound effects of DEIA retrenchment on women of color, LGBTQ+ individuals with disabilities, and other multiply marginalized groups. Intersectionality challenges single-axis analyses and centers the lived experiences of those most impacted by policy change.

Critical Policy Discourse Analysis complements CRT and Intersectionality by examining how language, framing, and narrative are used to construct legitimacy, authority, and exclusion in policymaking (Taylor, 2004). CPDA interrogates the rhetorical strategies that redefine equity initiatives as ideological overreach or bureaucratic excess. It explores how neutrality is invoked to justify policy reversals and how political actors deploy discursive tools to obscure regressive objectives.

By integrating these frameworks, the article offers a rigorous interpretive foundation for analyzing the legal, administrative, and discursive dimensions of DEIA dismantling. This approach foregrounds the ideological underpinnings of recent policy shifts and interrogates the normative claims used to rationalize structural exclusion.

The Politicization of Equity: Party Realignment, Identity Politics, and the DEI Divide

The struggle for civil rights in the United States did not initially divide cleanly along party lines. From the 1940s through the 1960s, both the Democratic and Republican parties contained active coalitions that supported civil rights reforms. These early alliances formed a crucial bipartisan foundation for what would eventually become the legal and institutional basis of diversity, equity, and inclusion policy in federal education, employment, and public administration. However, this brief era of bipartisan cooperation on civil rights would later give way to deep partisan polarization over equity issues, particularly around race, gender, and sexuality.

In the decades following World War II, the United States faced mounting pressure to address the contradiction between its democratic ideals and the persistence of racial segregation and discrimination. Civil rights activism gained national attention through court cases, nonviolent protest, and increasing media coverage of racial violence and inequality. During this time, both parties were composed of ideologically diverse members. Southern Democrats, known as Dixiecrats, strongly defended segregation, while Northern Democrats and moderate Republicans often aligned in support of civil rights legislation.

President Harry S. Truman, a Democrat, took early executive action in support of civil rights. In 1948, he signed Executive Order 9981, which desegregated the armed forces. This move, although controversial within his own party, marked a significant shift in federal policy and demonstrated the role of presidential leadership in advancing equity. Around the same time, Republican leaders such as Governor Earl Warren of California and Senator Jacob Javits of New York promoted civil rights reforms and played key roles in supporting the integration of schools and public services.

The bipartisan nature of civil rights reform reached its peak in the 1960s. Under the leadership of Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, two landmark laws that institutionalized racial equity in federal employment, education, and political participation. These laws prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, and national origin, and enforced equal access to voting. President Johnson's vision of a "Great Society" placed civil rights at the center of federal governance, using government as a tool to address historical injustices and improve social conditions across racial and economic lines.

Importantly, many of the votes that helped pass these laws came from Republican legislators, particularly those from the Northeast and Midwest. For example, Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen, a Republican from Illinois, was instrumental in rallying support for the Civil Rights Act. His leadership ensured that the legislation received the bipartisan backing needed to overcome a Southern filibuster. In fact, a greater proportion of Republicans in Congress voted for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 than Democrats, reflecting a moment when both parties included factions committed to civil liberties and equal protection under the law (Congressional Record, 1964).

While race and economic class were increasingly being addressed through federal civil rights policy, LGBTQ+ rights remained largely absent from political discourse during this period. Homosexuality was still widely criminalized, and both parties either ignored or actively suppressed discussions of sexual orientation and gender identity. No major political leader from either party advocated for LGBTQ+ equality in the 1940s through the 1960s. This silence reflected a broader societal unwillingness to recognize the existence or rights of LGBTQ+ individuals, and it would take decades before gender identity and sexual orientation would become part of civil rights legislation and executive action.

During the mid-twentieth century, the idea of civil rights was widely understood in terms of race and, to a lesser extent, gender. Equity in education and public service became associated with integration, affirmative hiring, and access to federal programs. Despite differences between individual legislators and regional factions, there was a temporary but meaningful bipartisan consensus that civil rights were a necessary component of modern democracy. This era laid the legal and moral groundwork for future DEI policies, including Title VI, Title VII, and Title IX, which were designed to move the country toward greater inclusion.

However, the same legislative successes that advanced civil rights also caused deep fractures within both political parties. As the Democratic Party increasingly embraced racial and social equity, many white voters, especially in the South, began to feel alienated. This would soon lead to a historic political realignment that shifted the parties' core identities, ushering in an era of partisan polarization around civil rights and equity that continues into the present.

Southern Realignment and Emerging Cultural Divides (1970s–1980s)

The period following the passage of major civil rights legislation in the 1960s witnessed a dramatic political transformation in the United States, particularly in the South. The bipartisan cooperation that once supported civil rights fractured, giving way to an ideological and geographic realignment that significantly reshaped both major parties. These shifts had lasting effects on the political discourse around equity, identity, and federal responsibility.

One of the most consequential developments during this period was the realignment of white Southern voters, who began moving away from the Democratic Party and toward the Republican Party. Historically, the South had been dominated by conservative Democrats who supported segregation and opposed civil rights reforms. However, the national Democratic Party's embrace of civil rights under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson alienated many white Southern voters. Republican leaders strategically addressed this discontent through what became known as the "Southern Strategy", a political approach that emphasized individual liberty, state sovereignty, and a rejection of federal intervention in racial matters. These themes appealed to Southern whites who opposed desegregation and resented the expanding role of the federal government in civil rights enforcement (Phillips, 1969; Carter, 1995).

By the 1970s, the Republican Party began consolidating its identity around conservative social values and free-market economic principles. President Richard Nixon and his successors positioned the party as the defender of "law and order," which resonated with voters concerned about urban unrest, school busing, and anti-war protests. While these slogans did not explicitly mention race, they were often interpreted as critiques of the civil rights movement and the perceived breakdown of traditional social hierarchies. Over time, the Republican Party's electoral base shifted from the Northeast and Midwest to the South and West, drawing support from suburban and rural white voters who felt left behind by the cultural and political changes of the 1960s.

This shift became more pronounced under the presidency of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. Reagan redefined public policy around the ideas of colorblindness and meritocracy. He opposed race-conscious remedies such as affirmative action, arguing that they violated the principles of equal treatment under the law. His administration framed DEI programs as "unfair preferences" that disadvantaged white Americans, particularly in education and employment. Reagan also reduced funding for civil rights enforcement and scaled back oversight of federal contractors' compliance with

equal opportunity requirements (Edley, 1996). This reorientation of federal priorities laid the groundwork for the modern conservative critique of DEI.

During the same period, LGBTQ+ identities began to emerge as a more visible political category, although they were largely met with hostility and institutional exclusion. Homosexuality remained criminalized in many states, and the federal government continued to enforce bans on LGBTQ+ military service and federal employment. In 1982, the Department of Defense formally adopted a policy excluding gay men and lesbians from military service, citing concerns about unit cohesion and morale. These policies reflected broad societal prejudice, which was compounded during the early years of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Rather than treating the epidemic as a public health emergency, many public officials, including members of both parties, responded with silence or stigmatization, further marginalizing LGBTQ+ communities (Shilts, 1987).

The Democratic Party also underwent significant changes during this time. As it lost white conservative voters in the South, it began to consolidate support among urban, working-class, and minority communities. Labor unions, civil rights organizations, and feminist groups became increasingly influential within the party's coalition. While the Democrats did not uniformly support all aspects of equity policy, they became more closely associated with efforts to expand access to education, healthcare, and civil rights protections. For example, Democratic lawmakers supported the Equal Rights Amendment, workplace protections for women, and educational equity legislation such as Title IX. Gradually, support for gay rights also emerged within certain factions of the party, although progress was uneven and often contested within its ranks.

In summary, the 1970s and 1980s marked a turning point in the politicization of equity in the United States. The Republican Party increasingly defined itself through resistance to federal equity programs, while the Democratic Party expanded its commitments to social inclusion and anti-discrimination efforts. This ideological split laid the foundation for the partisan divide that would deepen in the decades to come, particularly around issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation. The language of merit, neutrality, and traditional values became tools for justifying the retrenchment of DEI, while advocates for inclusion began building the theoretical and institutional frameworks that would later define DEIA policy in education and public administration.

Inclusion and Resistance in the 1990s and 2000s

The 1990s and early 2000s were a time of both expansion and resistance for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts across the United States. Public institutions, schools, universities, and some sectors of government began to embrace inclusion more visibly. These efforts were often supported by arguments that diversity helped improve performance, increased fairness, and made institutions more reflective of the communities they served. At the same time, opposition to these efforts began to grow stronger, especially among conservative leaders and religious groups who saw inclusion policies as a threat to traditional values or as examples of government overreach.

During the Clinton administration, the Democratic Party became more associated with the language of multiculturalism and educational access. President Bill Clinton expressed public support for affirmative action and worked to preserve policies aimed at reducing inequality. However, his support was careful and moderate. In 1995, he argued that affirmative action should be “mended, not ended,” suggesting reforms rather than full support or full rejection. His administration promoted diversity training in federal agencies and expanded funding for historically underserved groups in education,

though it avoided taking bold steps that could provoke conservative backlash. The focus was often on maintaining political balance rather than aggressively pushing forward new protections or programs.

During this same time, LGBTQ rights began to gain greater public attention. In 1993, the United States adopted the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, which allowed gay and lesbian individuals to serve in the military only if they did not openly disclose their sexual orientation. This policy was promoted as a compromise between full inclusion and existing bans on LGBTQ service members. However, in practice, it reinforced secrecy and led to the discharge of thousands of military personnel. It was not until many years later that open service would become possible.

Legal challenges related to employment discrimination against LGBTQ individuals also began to emerge in the courts. Civil rights organizations started to challenge the idea that employers could fire workers because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Although progress was slow, these cases laid the groundwork for future rulings that expanded the legal definition of discrimination to include LGBTQ people.

At the same time, many Republican leaders began to align more closely with religious conservatives who opposed the growing reach of DEI. These groups were particularly vocal in rejecting the inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in nondiscrimination policies. Their arguments often centered on religious liberty and what they called the protection of family values. The belief that government policy should not interfere with private beliefs or institutional religious teachings led to widespread opposition to policies seen as favoring LGBTQ inclusion or race-based affirmative action.

During the presidency of George W. Bush, this resistance became more formalized. While President Bush spoke in favor of inclusion and appointed individuals from diverse backgrounds to visible positions, his administration supported legal arguments against affirmative action. In the University of Michigan cases decided in 2003, the Bush administration filed briefs opposing the use of race in college admissions. These actions reflected a growing belief within the Republican Party that DEI programs violated the principle of equal treatment under the law and should be reduced or eliminated.

Bush also promoted the expansion of faith-based programs through his Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. These programs allowed religious organizations to receive public funds for delivering social services. However, they also permitted these organizations to operate under religious guidelines, including the ability to reject job applicants or clients who did not meet their moral or theological standards. This created legal conflicts around nondiscrimination laws and opened the door for organizations to exclude LGBTQ individuals while still receiving government funding.

Despite these challenges, the inclusion movement continued to grow. By the late 2000s, more schools had diversity offices, more companies had workplace inclusion strategies, and more legal cases had been filed on behalf of LGBTQ individuals and racial minorities. Still, the period was marked by deep cultural and political divisions. Supporters of DEI saw these efforts as necessary correctives to long histories of exclusion and injustice. Critics claimed that DEI policies created new forms of unfairness and undermined values such as religious freedom and personal responsibility.

This tension between inclusion and resistance became a defining feature of the national conversation around equity. It also set the stage for the growing backlash that would appear in the next decade, fueled by populist movements, judicial shifts, and new legislation aimed at dismantling many of the gains made during this period.

The Modern Divide and DEI as Political Target (2010s–2020s)

During the 2010s and into the early 2020s, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion became a central arena of political and ideological conflict in the United States. What had once been a set of policy tools aimed at addressing long-standing discrimination evolved into a contested space where federal administrations applied sharply divergent visions of justice, fairness, and national identity. Under President Barack Obama, the federal government made significant advancements in the legal recognition and institutional protection of LGBTQ individuals.

The Obama administration issued guidance through the Department of Education clarifying that Title IX protections against sex discrimination in educational institutions extended to transgender students. This marked an important step in applying civil rights law to matters of gender identity. In addition, federal agencies adopted nondiscrimination policies covering sexual orientation and gender identity in both hiring and service delivery. The Affordable Care Act was interpreted to prohibit discrimination based on gender identity in health care access. Collectively, these efforts placed LGBTQ protections more firmly within the existing civil rights framework and expanded DEI to address issues of gender, identity, and intersectional injustice.

However, as DEI initiatives grew in visibility, so too did opposition from Republican lawmakers and conservative advocacy groups. These groups increasingly framed DEI programs, especially those focusing on race and gender identity, as politicized, divisive, and ideologically coercive. Arguments centered on claims that DEI infringed on freedom of speech, academic freedom, or religious conscience. Public campaigns portrayed diversity training as a form of indoctrination and framed race-conscious policies as unconstitutional preferences. In this context, DEI began to lose bipartisan support and became associated with progressive political agendas rather than shared civic goals.

This ideological shift reached its apex during the administration of President Donald J. Trump. His administration moved quickly to dismantle much of the DEI infrastructure built under previous presidents. One of the most significant actions was the signing of Executive Order 13950 in 2020, which prohibited federal agencies, contractors, and grant recipients from offering training programs that addressed systemic racism or unconscious bias. The order framed these programs as divisive and un-American, directly challenging the legitimacy of Critical Race Theory and related educational frameworks. In the area of education, the Department of Education withdrew the Obama-era Title IX guidance protecting transgender students. These reversals signaled a broader strategy of eliminating identity-based protections and reasserting a colorblind interpretation of civil rights law.

President Joe Biden responded swiftly upon taking office in 2021 by revoking Executive Order 13950 and reinstating protections through several new orders. Executive Order 13988 directed federal agencies to prevent and combat discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation. Executive Order 14020 created the White House Gender Policy Council to promote gender equity across all areas of government policy. Executive Order 14035 required federal agencies to develop strategic plans to advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in their internal structures and external programs. These actions signaled a renewed commitment to DEI as a vital component of democratic governance and federal accountability.

Despite these restorations, the political divide over DEI only deepened. As conservative activists gained influence in state legislatures, new laws were introduced to restrict the teaching of race and gender in public schools, eliminate DEI offices in public universities, and bar the use of public funds for programs promoting inclusion. Legal challenges to race-conscious admissions continued, eventually

leading to the Supreme Court's ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* in 2023, which severely limited the use of affirmative action in higher education.

In 2025, with the return of Donald Trump to the presidency, the federal approach to DEI shifted once again. The introduction of Executive Orders 14151 and 14173 marked an aggressive campaign to dismantle all identity-conscious policies across the federal government. These orders reinstated the ideological language of neutrality, colorblindness, and merit, presenting them as universal standards of fairness. However, by removing specific protections for historically marginalized groups, these policies effectively erased the mechanisms that had been developed to promote inclusion and address systemic barriers. Executive Order 14173, in particular, signaled the administration's intent to eliminate all references to DEIA from agency guidance, public education materials, and funding requirements. The framing of these actions as neutral masked their impact, which was the withdrawal of federal support for LGBTQ protections, racial equity programs, and gender-based civil rights enforcement.

The back-and-forth nature of these policies over a span of just fifteen years demonstrates the precarious position of DEI in the United States. Far from being a settled matter of public administration, DEI has become a site of ideological struggle, subject to reversal with each change in political leadership. These patterns reveal not only the volatility of federal civil rights policy but also the extent to which DEI has become a symbolic battleground in the wider fight over the country's democratic identity.

Implications for Educational Policy

The transformation of federal priorities around diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility has created serious challenges for educational institutions across the United States. As political definitions of fairness and discrimination have shifted, schools, colleges, and universities are increasingly caught between competing interpretations of civil rights, institutional autonomy, and public accountability. What was once a growing consensus around equity in education has become a contested terrain marked by ideological conflict, legal ambiguity, and policy reversals.

One major consequence of these shifts is a fundamental redefinition of what counts as discrimination in education. For institutions committed to addressing historical and structural inequalities, equity requires proactive support for marginalized groups, including racial minorities, women, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ individuals. This vision builds upon decades of civil rights scholarship that highlights how formal equality often conceals deeper social and institutional disparities (Crenshaw, 1991; Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Kendi, 2019). However, opponents of DEI argue that treating individuals differently to address group-based disadvantage is itself a form of reverse discrimination. These competing views have made it difficult for educational leaders to establish consistent practices across federal and state jurisdictions.

LGBTQ protections, in particular, have become politically vulnerable. As federal administrations adopt opposing policies on issues such as gender identity, bathroom access, and pronoun use, schools are left to navigate uncertainty and risk. In conservative states, public universities have faced pressure to eliminate DEI offices, remove gender-inclusive language from student services, and revise nondiscrimination statements to align with state laws that exclude sexual orientation or gender identity as protected categories. These changes have created real consequences for LGBTQ students, who face increased stigma and reduced institutional support (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020).

Federal policy plays a direct role in shaping curriculum design, campus safety protocols, hiring practices, and faculty development. When the Department of Education issues guidance under Title IX or other civil rights laws, it directly affects how schools address bullying, sexual harassment, and gender-based discrimination. Withdrawing or reversing such guidance undermines the infrastructure of protection built over decades. At the same time, court decisions and executive orders that reject affirmative action or diversity training send signals to institutions about what kinds of equity work are legally and politically acceptable (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Taylor, 2009).

Another serious challenge involves the growing perception that DEI is an ideological agenda rather than an educational imperative. As political actors portray equity-focused initiatives as threats to academic freedom, viewpoint diversity, or parental rights, educational leaders are forced to defend long-standing commitments to inclusive teaching and learning. In this context, the role of public education as a democratic institution is increasingly under attack. Scholars have noted that the politicization of educational equity often leads to the erosion of trust in schools and colleges, undermining their role in promoting critical thinking and civic engagement (Ball, 2017; Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

Many institutions now operate under conflicting pressures. On one hand, they are expected to comply with federal civil rights laws and accreditation standards that promote inclusive excellence. On the other hand, they face state-level bans on discussing systemic racism, teaching about gender identity, or supporting affirmative action. The result is a chilling effect in classrooms, staff training, and institutional policymaking. Even administrators who support DEI values may retreat from public action for fear of political or financial retaliation.

In summary, the national divide over DEI has far-reaching consequences for educational policy and practice. Without a stable and coherent federal framework for equity, institutions must navigate a fractured landscape where legal compliance, moral responsibility, and political risk are in constant tension. The marginalization of DEI not only affects vulnerable student populations but also threatens the foundational mission of education as a space for inclusion, opportunity, and democratic participation.

Policy Instruments Dismantling DEI

The growing political opposition to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility has not remained limited to speeches or campaign messages. It has resulted in concrete actions through executive orders and federal legislation. While the previous section showed how these changes have affected education and public institutions, this section explains how recent government decisions have been used to remove DEI policies across the country. These actions show a clear plan to replace long-standing equity efforts with a new idea of neutrality, where identity-based programs are no longer seen as acceptable.

This shift began with Executive Order 13950, signed in 2020 during President Trump's first term. It banned federal training that included what it called divisive ideas, such as the role of systemic racism in American institutions. When President Trump returned to office in 2025, he expanded these efforts through two more executive orders. Executive Order 14151 canceled all previous DEIA policies across the federal government. Executive Order 14173 went further by requiring all public programs to follow a strict idea of neutrality, meaning they could no longer use race, gender, or other identity categories to guide decisions or measure impact.

At the same time, Congress introduced several bills that supported these changes. Senate Bill 4516, called the Dismantle DEI Act, proposed removing all federal funding and positions related to DEI. Senate Bill 382 would limit equity programs and stop federal agencies from collecting data based on race or gender. House Bill 925 targeted how colleges and universities hire staff and run programs that support diversity. House Bill 1, known as the Big Beautiful Bill, proposed removing the use of demographic information from public decision-making in all federal agencies.

These executive and legislative tools work together to undo the DEI progress made over several decades. They change the way the government defines fairness and remove protections for groups that have long faced discrimination. The next part of this article looks closely at each policy to understand what it says, how it works, and what it means for the future of public life in the United States.

Executive Orders under Trump (2020–2025)

Presidential executive power has often played a decisive role in shaping civil rights policy in the United States. During Donald J. Trump's presidency, this power was used to weaken and eventually dismantle many of the federal initiatives that supported diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. Three executive orders, issued between 2020 and 2025, became key policy instruments in reversing DEIA efforts across federal agencies and public institutions. These orders promoted a shift away from identity-conscious governance and framed neutrality as the official standard for all public programs. Executive Order 13950, signed in September 2020, marked the beginning of this effort.

It prohibited any federal training that included what the administration described as divisive concepts. These included ideas that the United States is fundamentally racist or sexist, or that individuals bear unconscious bias based on race or gender. The order applied to federal agencies, contractors, and grant recipients, and it effectively restricted anti-racism training and diversity education (Office of the Federal Register, 2020). Critics argued that the order misrepresented critical race theory and silenced honest discussions about inequality in public life (Taylor, 2009; Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

Although President Biden revoked this order in early 2021 through Executive Order 13985, its ideological influence continued. When Trump returned to office in 2025, he issued Executive Order 14151, which revoked all prior DEIA-related guidance and policies. This included the strategic plans and administrative structures that had been created under Executive Order 14035. With this action, federal agencies were no longer required to advance DEIA principles in hiring, services, or policymaking. The order eliminated oversight bodies, reporting requirements, and equity-focused leadership roles (Office of the Federal Register, 2025a).

Executive Order 14173, issued shortly afterward in 2025, reinforced this policy direction by establishing neutrality as the federal government's guiding principle. Under this standard, no agency could design programs or collect data based on race, gender, disability, or other identity categories. While the order claimed to protect fairness and equal treatment, scholars warned that removing identity-based assessments makes it impossible to measure or address long-standing disparities (Crenshaw, 1991; Kendi, 2019; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). In effect, the policy promotes a colorblind approach that ignores social conditions and maintains existing patterns of exclusion (Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

These three executive orders represent a major shift in federal policy. Instead of supporting targeted equity efforts, the government now prohibits them by framing identity-conscious work as discriminatory. These actions not only changed how federal agencies operate, but also influenced public schools, colleges, and nonprofit organizations that depend on federal guidance. By removing the legal

and institutional foundations of DEIA, the executive branch has played a central role in redefining what fairness means in American public life.

Legislative Action Against DEI

While executive orders have played a major role in dismantling federal support for diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, legislative proposals in both chambers of Congress have further advanced this agenda. These legislative efforts reflect a broader political strategy to make permanent changes in how the federal government defines and applies principles of equity. Through the restriction of funding, the elimination of demographic data, and limits on institutional autonomy, recent bills seek to remove the legal and operational foundations of DEI from federal policy and higher education. Senate Bill 4516, introduced in 2024 and titled the “Dismantle DEI Act,” aims to eliminate all funding for DEI-related roles and activities in federal agencies. The bill prohibits the creation or maintenance of offices or staff positions dedicated to diversity or inclusion. It also bans the use of federal funds for training, programming, or outreach that references race, gender, sexual orientation, or cultural identity.

The bill frames these actions as necessary to uphold neutrality and to prevent the misuse of taxpayer funds for what it characterizes as political agendas. However, civil rights scholars argue that removing institutional mechanisms for equity weakens the government's ability to correct structural discrimination and undermines the goals of equal opportunity established since the civil rights movement (Ball, 2017; DeMatthews and Izquierdo, 2020).

Senate Bill 382, introduced in 2025, goes beyond staffing and targets data collection itself. The bill prohibits federal agencies from collecting or analyzing information based on race, gender, sexual orientation, or other identity categories in the administration of public programs. Supporters of the bill claim it prevents bias in decision-making and preserves fairness. In contrast, critics argue that the absence of demographic data makes it impossible to identify disparities or evaluate the impact of public policies on marginalized communities (Crenshaw, 1991; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). In the absence of such data, government programs may reinforce inequality while appearing neutral on the surface.

House Bill 925, also introduced in 2025, focuses on higher education. The bill prohibits public colleges and universities from using DEI criteria in hiring, promotion, or faculty training. It also limits student affairs programming that centers on race, gender, or identity. The bill is part of a larger movement among conservative lawmakers to remove DEI offices from university campuses and to restrict faculty speech on issues of systemic discrimination. These measures have sparked strong opposition from educators and national academic associations, who view them as an attack on academic freedom and institutional autonomy (Kendi, 2019; Taylor, 2009).

Finally, House Bill 1, commonly referred to by its sponsors as the “Big Beautiful Bill,” represents the most comprehensive legislative effort to remove identity-based metrics from all areas of federal policymaking. Introduced in early 2025, the bill prohibits the use of demographic data in performance evaluation, policy design, grant eligibility, and program oversight across federal agencies. Its sponsors argue that the bill promotes a culture of individual merit and objectivity. Yet scholars warn that removing the ability to measure inequality is a way to ignore it entirely. Without the tools to see who benefits and who is left behind, the promise of equal protection under the law becomes empty (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Kendi, 2019).

These bills together represent a sweeping legislative campaign to redefine civil rights protections and remove the infrastructure that has supported DEI since the 1960s. If enacted, they would not only reverse existing equity measures but also make it significantly harder for future administrations to restore them. The legislative framing of neutrality and fairness disguises the extent to which these actions shift power away from communities that have long struggled for access, recognition, and justice.

Neutrality as Political Strategy

The growing effort to dismantle Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility policies in the United States is increasingly framed through the language of neutrality, objectivity, and merit. Policymakers who support these efforts do not always oppose equity goals outright. Instead, they argue that such goals unfairly benefit certain groups and violate principles of fairness and equality. This rhetorical shift allows lawmakers to present their actions as balanced and lawful, even while they remove protections for communities that have historically faced systemic discrimination. This section explores how the political use of neutrality conceals power imbalances and redefines the meaning of fairness in a way that protects the status quo.

The use of “colorblind” and “merit-based” language has become common in federal and state-level proposals that seek to roll back DEI programs. Proponents claim that identity should not be a factor in decision-making. According to this view, recognizing race, gender, or sexuality in hiring, admissions, curriculum, or policy represents a form of reverse discrimination. The language of neutrality appears to reject bias, but in reality, it denies the existence of structural inequality. Scholars such as Bonilla-Silva (2018) argue that recent backlash against DEI often stems from a perception among some white Americans that policies designed to promote inclusion come at their expense. This perception, although not supported by empirical evidence of systemic harm, reflects a broader unease with the shifting distribution of cultural and institutional power.

The argument often comes down to a preference for formal equality over substantive equity. Formal equality treats everyone the same regardless of history or present-day disadvantage. In theory, it offers a fair playing field. In practice, it does not account for the ways in which individuals and communities experience discrimination and exclusion. For example, two students may be treated identically by a school, but if one student comes from an underfunded school district, lacks access to transportation, or faces language barriers, equal treatment alone will not lead to equal opportunity. Substantive equity recognizes these disparities and works to reduce them through targeted interventions such as outreach programs, scholarships, or inclusive curriculum design (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Taylor, 2009).

While these arguments are framed in terms of equal treatment, critical scholars question whether they serve to obscure efforts that reproduce racial hierarchy under the guise of fairness (Kendi, 2019). This raises concerns about whether certain factions within the modern Republican Party use policy mechanisms to reinforce a social order rooted in racial dominance rather than true equality.

The appeal to neutrality also draws heavily on constitutional language and the authority of the nation’s founding documents. Political leaders often cite the Constitution to argue that policies must treat all citizens the same and avoid preference based on identity. However, this interpretation ignores the historical limitations of those texts. At the time of the Constitution’s ratification, citizenship and basic rights were limited to white, landowning men. Enslaved individuals were considered property,

Indigenous communities were forcibly displaced, and women had no legal standing in most public matters.

The original Constitution did not include protections for racial minorities, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, or people with disabilities. These rights were fought for over time through constitutional amendments, landmark legislation, and sustained activism (Crenshaw, 1991). To treat the founding documents as neutral standards of fairness today is to erase the long history of exclusion that they once justified.

The use of neutrality as a political tool is not new. In the past, similar language was used to resist school desegregation, oppose affirmative action, and weaken the enforcement of civil rights laws. In each case, the argument was framed around protecting individual rights and avoiding so-called government overreach. Today, that same logic is being applied to DEI initiatives. By redefining equity work as political or biased, lawmakers are able to avoid accountability for the inequalities their policies reinforce. For example, when state governments eliminate DEI offices from public universities, they often claim to be removing politics from education. In fact, they are removing resources that support marginalized students and faculty, weakening institutional responses to discrimination, and silencing inclusive scholarship (Kendi, 2019; DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020).

This strategy is especially harmful because it reframes public values. Instead of equity being understood as a necessary response to injustice, it is treated as an unfair advantage. Instead of inclusion being seen as a public good, it is described as a threat to traditional values or freedom of speech. The result is a public narrative that treats civil rights as optional and paints identity-based advocacy as extremist. This not only discourages institutions from taking action but also puts educators, administrators, and public officials at risk of retaliation for supporting equity goals.

In sum, neutrality has become a powerful rhetorical and legal tool for reversing civil rights gains under the appearance of fairness. The policies and legislation discussed throughout this article use language that sounds balanced and objective. However, when examined through a critical lens, they reveal a clear strategy to dismantle protections, erase data, and prevent future progress. As scholars continue to show, the denial of race, gender, and identity in public life is not neutrality. It is a form of structured avoidance that benefits those already in power while leaving vulnerable communities without voice or support (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Crenshaw, 1991; Taylor, 2009).

Implications for Education and Public Institutions

The erosion of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility policies at the federal level has led to substantial and lasting consequences for the functioning of American education and public institutions. Although the legal and political language framing these policy reversals often emphasizes neutrality, objectivity, or merit, their real-life effects disproportionately harm historically marginalized communities.

These changes reshape institutional missions, narrow definitions of public service, and shift the ethical responsibilities of schools, universities, and federal agencies. What were once proactive frameworks designed to remove structural barriers are now recast as political liabilities or constitutional violations. This section examines how these transformations impact both public education and federal institutions, focusing on the removal of inclusive programming, the weakening of accountability structures, and the growing tension between professional ethics and political compliance.

Public Education

The rollback of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility policies at the federal level is directly reshaping public education in the United States. As executive orders and legislation redefine equity as a threat to neutrality or fairness, school systems across the country face pressure to eliminate programs designed to support historically marginalized students. This dismantling affects not only what is taught in classrooms but also how teachers are trained, how students are supported, and how schools respond to cultural and racial inequity.

One of the most visible consequences is the removal of inclusive curricula. Across multiple states, school boards and legislatures have adopted language echoing federal efforts to restrict content perceived as divisive or politically motivated. The result has been a sharp decline in the teaching of racial history, gender studies, and LGBTQ+ contributions to society. According to Sleeter and Carmona (2017), culturally relevant curricula not only improve academic outcomes for students of color but also foster greater civic engagement and empathy among all students. Efforts to restrict or eliminate such content disproportionately harm those whose identities have long been excluded from dominant educational narratives.

Professional development programs focused on equity, implicit bias, and anti-racism have also come under attack. Executive Order 13950 and subsequent policies discouraged federal agencies and contractors from conducting such training, with ripple effects in the education sector. As a result, many school districts canceled workshops or revised professional development guidelines to avoid potential legal or political backlash (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). The loss of this training weakens teachers' capacity to meet the diverse needs of their students and reduces their awareness of how systemic inequities operate within educational settings.

Student support services have similarly been targeted. DEI offices in universities and K–12 systems have been defunded or dissolved, removing programs that offer mentorship, academic advising, mental health care, and advocacy for students from underrepresented backgrounds. For many students of color, LGBTQ+ students, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities, these services are not symbolic, they are essential to retention and success (Harper & Simmons, 2019).

Furthermore, the delegitimization of culturally responsive pedagogy and historical truth-telling represents a profound shift in the educational mission. Culturally responsive teaching, as defined by Ladson-Billings (1995), seeks to affirm students' identities and build academic rigor by connecting curriculum to real-world experiences. Critics of DEI have dismissed this approach as ideological or anti-American, even though research consistently shows that inclusive pedagogy improves student engagement and achievement (Gay, 2018).

These changes are not isolated. They form part of a larger political movement to redefine the role of public education. Instead of promoting democratic citizenship, critical thinking, and social justice, the emerging vision prioritizes individualism, standardized knowledge, and conformity to traditional norms. As such, the dismantling of DEI frameworks in public education is not only a rollback of policy. It is a redefinition of what education should be and whom it should serve.

Federal Workforce

The federal workforce has undergone significant structural changes due to the reversal of key diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility initiatives. These changes began with the revocation of executive orders that had previously established DEIA goals across federal agencies. Orders such as Executive Order 13583 on establishing a coordinated government-wide diversity and inclusion initiative, Executive Order 13985 on advancing racial equity, Executive Order 13988 on preventing discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation, Executive Order 14020 on the creation of the White House Gender Policy Council, and Executive Order 14035 on implementing a government-wide DEIA strategic plan, collectively marked a turning point in institutional accountability for inclusion (Office of Personnel Management, 2021).

The elimination of DEIA offices and strategic plans has led to the loss of infrastructure that once supported fair hiring, equitable promotion practices, and employee protections. Compliance tools such as equity assessments, demographic data collection, and bias training have been suspended or legally challenged. The passage of Senate Bill 4516 and the introduction of Executive Orders 14151 and 14173 further solidified this rollback. These orders directed all federal agencies to abandon identity-conscious practices and adopt a so-called neutral approach to recruitment and management. However, as scholars have noted, neutrality in institutional design often reinforces dominant norms rather than correcting unequal outcomes (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Crenshaw, 1991).

Hiring initiatives designed to recruit underrepresented populations have also been curtailed. Previously, federal agencies worked to expand employment opportunities for veterans, individuals with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, women, and LGBTQ-plus individuals. With the dissolution of DEIA structures, agencies are no longer required to report progress toward diversity goals or ensure representation in senior leadership. In practice, this has reduced transparency in employment practices and limited the government's ability to create a workforce that reflects the diversity of the nation it serves (Jabbar & Sun, 2023).

Moreover, the absence of DEIA frameworks diminishes the quality of the work environment for current employees. Research shows that inclusive workplaces not only improve morale and retention but also enhance productivity and innovation in the public sector (Thomas & Ely, 1996; Scott, 2021). By removing these supports, the federal government risks increasing turnover, undermining public trust, and weakening its institutional knowledge base.

In summary, the restructuring of the federal workforce through the dismantling of DEIA policies represents more than a change in administrative priorities. It signals a retreat from a public service model grounded in equal opportunity and inclusive governance. The long-term implications extend beyond federal offices. As the nation's largest employer, the federal government sets a precedent for private and nonprofit sectors. When DEIA is removed from federal policy, the message communicated is that equity is no longer a public value.

Public Services and Civic Participation

The rollback of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility frameworks has had wide-reaching effects beyond the federal workforce and education system. It has also weakened the equity infrastructure that supported fair access to essential public services, including health care, housing, and legal protections. These services, once governed by both civil rights legislation and administrative

equity guidance, now face reduced oversight and diminished protections for historically marginalized groups. At the same time, the undermining of DEIA principles contributes to growing distrust in public institutions, particularly among those who have long relied on these structures for redress and representation.

In health care, the rescinding of DEIA guidelines has disrupted efforts to address racial and gender disparities in medical treatment, preventive care, and mental health services. Previous initiatives under Executive Order 13985 and related agency strategies promoted culturally competent care and targeted service delivery to underserved communities. With the revocation of these measures, federal health agencies are no longer obligated to track disparities or prioritize equity in funding decisions. Research consistently shows that racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ-plus individuals face systemic barriers to accessing timely and appropriate health care (Williams & Cooper, 2019; Yearby, 2020). The absence of equity-focused policy tools exacerbates these gaps and undermines efforts to promote public health across diverse populations.

In housing and urban development, the removal of DEIA frameworks has also had a chilling effect on enforcement and community investment. Programs designed to address housing discrimination and expand access to affordable housing for marginalized groups have been deprioritized. As Goetz (2020) explains, fair housing policies require not only legal safeguards but also proactive strategies that recognize and respond to historical segregation and economic exclusion. Without federal equity mandates, local jurisdictions face less accountability for discriminatory zoning practices and unequal distribution of resources.

Legal protections, particularly for individuals facing discrimination based on race, gender identity, or immigration status, have been weakened by changes in administrative interpretation and enforcement. The withdrawal of inclusive federal guidance leaves state and local agencies to determine their own approaches to civil rights enforcement, resulting in uneven protection across jurisdictions. This fragmentation leads to confusion, underreporting of discrimination, and limited access to justice for vulnerable populations (Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

These policy changes also affect civic participation. When public institutions retreat from equity, affected communities may lose faith in the legitimacy of those institutions. Scholars have found that civic engagement is strongly tied to perceptions of fairness and inclusion in the public sphere (Levinson, 2012). As DEIA is removed from policy and practice, individuals from marginalized backgrounds may feel increasingly alienated from electoral processes, public meetings, and policymaking forums. The reduction of representation and support signals that their voices are no longer welcome in the democratic process.

In sum, the dismantling of DEIA policies across public services creates cascading effects that weaken the social contract between government and the people. It not only reintroduces systemic barriers to essential services but also erodes the participatory foundations of American democracy. Rebuilding trust and restoring access will require not only policy reversal but a renewed commitment to equity as a guiding principle in public governance.

Discussion

The current dismantling of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility frameworks across the United States is not a temporary policy correction. It represents a broader political regression rooted in ideological resistance to the expansion of civil rights. The movement to reverse DEI initiatives is highly

strategic. It aims to restore a social order that privileges dominant identities while marginalizing efforts to address historical injustice. This regression is not isolated to a single administration or party; it reflects a growing coalition of political actors, legal strategists, and cultural institutions who view the language and tools of equity as threats to the status quo.

A central pattern that emerges is the use of legality and institutional power to disguise exclusionary aims in the language of neutrality. As Bonilla-Silva (2018) explains, contemporary racial structures often function through “colorblind racism,” in which institutional actors claim to ignore race while simultaneously reinforcing systems of racial advantage. This strategy is not limited to race. It applies equally to gender, sexual orientation, disability, and other forms of identity. By framing DEI as a form of preferential treatment, critics obscure the ways in which systemic barriers continue to limit access and opportunity for many Americans (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The result is a public discourse in which equity is cast as a special interest rather than a constitutional imperative.

The dismantling of DEI also signals a deeper erosion of the public mission of key institutions. Historically, public education, civil service, and government-funded programs were increasingly expected to address the inequalities embedded in American society. This expectation was not merely symbolic; it was embedded in legal mandates, administrative directives, and professional standards. The reversal of this trend reorients institutions away from those commitments. For example, the closure of DEI offices in federal agencies, the banning of inclusive curriculum content, and the disbanding of diversity training programs reflect a fundamental redefinition of institutional purpose. Public institutions are being reshaped to align with a narrow vision of citizenship that excludes the complexity of American identity (Giroux, 2020; Taylor, 2006).

This erosion is exacerbated by the temporary and precarious nature of many DEI policies. Most federal DEIA strategies in recent decades have relied on executive orders. These include Executive Orders 13583, 13985, 13988, 14020, and 14035, all of which were designed to guide the federal workforce and federally funded institutions toward more inclusive practices. However, the absence of legislative grounding made these efforts vulnerable to immediate reversal. The issuance of Executive Orders 14151 and 14173 in 2025 illustrates how quickly an administration can erase years of progress. These new orders abolished existing DEIA guidance and replaced it with mandates requiring agencies to act as if identity-based disparities do not exist. As Johnson and Martínez (2022) argue, reliance on executive authority without statutory backing makes DEI efforts politically fragile and legally tenuous.

Moreover, this systematic rollback must be situated within a longer historical pattern of resistance to civil rights progress. Each major gain in equity—from school desegregation to gender equality in employment, has been met with backlash, legal obstruction, and cultural resistance. Critical race theory and intersectionality help us understand these responses not as irrational but as deeply embedded features of social systems designed to maintain hierarchies of power (Crenshaw, 1991; Bell, 1992). The current resistance to DEI fits this pattern. It recycles old arguments about merit, fairness, and colorblindness while deploying new legal and administrative tools to prevent further structural change.

A central challenge facing scholars and policymakers today is the need to move DEI from discretionary policy into permanent statutory and constitutional frameworks. As long as equity remains a preference rather than a legal right, it will be vulnerable to reversal. Legislative reforms are needed to ensure that non-discrimination, affirmative access, and inclusive governance are embedded in law. This includes passing federal legislation that affirms the legality of equity-based programs, requires demographic data collection, and funds inclusive public education. It also requires a deeper rethinking of constitutional interpretation. The Fourteenth Amendment’s equal protection clause must be read in light

of systemic inequality, not just formal legal status. As Taylor (2006) argues, achieving educational equity demands a critical approach to law that accounts for historical and institutional barriers.

The dismantling of DEI is not simply a matter of shifting administrative priorities. It is a larger threat to democratic pluralism, civic equality, and the integrity of public institutions. If this trajectory continues unchecked, it risks returning the country to a legal and social landscape that permits exclusion under the false promise of neutrality. Protecting the gains of the past and ensuring equity for the future requires more than defending existing policies. It demands building a constitutional and legislative architecture in which DEI is not optional but foundational.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article examined how the principles of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility, known as DEIA, have been weakened by recent federal actions. The main question was whether recent executive and legislative measures have eroded DEIA and what this means for ordinary people in the United States. The answer is yes. The analysis showed that these actions have not only reduced support for equity but have also changed the meaning of fairness in public life.

This conclusion is based on a wide range of evidence. It includes a review of the historical development of DEIA, the legal and policy tools that supported it, and the new policies that now restrict it. These actions include executive orders that removed equity requirements from federal agencies and legislation that blocks funding and bans the use of identity-based data. They also include court decisions and policy reversals that weaken protections for racial minorities, women, LGBTQ individuals, and people with disabilities.

The article also showed that the language used to justify these changes is misleading. Terms like neutrality and merit are used to suggest fairness. In reality, these terms hide the fact that structural barriers still exist. By pretending that everyone is already equal, these policies ignore the real conditions that affect access to education, jobs, healthcare, and legal protection. This is not true fairness. It is a return to systems that have long favored some groups while excluding others.

The study used several academic theories to understand what is happening. Critical Race Theory explains how racism can remain hidden in laws and institutions. Intersectionality helps explain how people can face more than one kind of discrimination at the same time. Feminist and queer theories show how gender and sexuality matter in how people experience exclusion. The sociology of education explains how schools can support or block equality. Critical policy discourse analysis shows how words are used to shape ideas of fairness and justice.

Together, these tools helped show that the dismantling of DEIA is not just about policy. It is about power. It is about who gets to decide what fairness means and who benefits from that decision. The removal of DEIA offices, programs, and data collection is not neutral. It is an attempt to erase the tools that allowed the government to understand and correct inequality. Without these tools, it becomes much harder to see where injustice exists and to take action to fix it.

The article also explored the historical roots of DEIA in the women's rights movement, the civil rights movement, and the broader struggle for inclusion. These movements made clear that full democracy requires more than equal laws. It requires equity in practice. That means recognizing when people face different barriers and doing something about it. The laws and executive orders created over many decades supported this idea. The recent efforts to remove them represent a major shift away from that goal.

The consequences are serious. Schools are removing inclusive curriculum. Federal agencies have stopped tracking who gets left out. Hiring programs that once brought diversity to the workforce are being eliminated. Students, workers, and citizens who once had support now face silence or rejection. Public institutions that once worked to reflect the country's diversity are now being reshaped to ignore it.

In short, the article shows that DEIA is not a political trend. It is a necessary response to real and lasting inequalities. When public leaders remove these programs, they are not creating fairness. They are removing the ability to create it. If this continues, it will weaken the foundations of democracy, public trust, and equal protection under the law.

The article answered the central research question and all the supporting questions. It provided a full account of how DEIA developed, how it was institutionalized, how it is now being dismantled, and what this means for education, government, and society. The evidence makes clear that restoring and protecting equity requires more than defending past policies. It requires new legal frameworks, stronger civic commitment, and a clear understanding that fairness without equity is not justice.

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