

## What does DEI mean, and why does Donald Trump want to ban diversity programs?

By Elissa Steedman with AP and Reuters, ABC News, Tue 11 Feb 2025

In his second term as president, Donald Trump has taken aim at workplace DEI initiatives.

The phrase has become a bit of a catch-all in political commentary in the US, but what it refers to can be a little vague.

Here's a simple breakdown of what DEI means and why it's being debated.

### What does DEI stand for?

DEI is an acronym for "**diversity, equity and inclusion**". Let's break that down even further by looking at the meaning of each word in the label, according to **Harvard Business School**.

- **Diversity:** The representation of minority groups in a workplace
- **Equity:** Equal access to opportunities and fair or impartial treatment
- **Inclusion:** A feeling of belonging and respect

### What is DEI in the US?

You may have heard some people use DEI interchangeably with terms such as "affirmative action" and "diversity hires", but they're not quite the same.

Businesses and government departments use DEI as a label to refer to **policies and measures that ensure people of all backgrounds gain equal access and thrive in their workplace**.

Such **initiatives are aimed at addressing longstanding structural racism and sexism** by promoting opportunities within organisations for people with diverse identities.

The lines between DEI policies and affirmative action can be a little blurry.

In modern terms, affirmative action refers to where special consideration is given to applicants, based on their race or gender identity.

Pauline Kim, an employment law expert at Washington University, told Vox **in older cases**, affirmative action was where universities or employers reserved places for people of certain minority groups.

"There are people on the right who attack DEI programs, equating them with something like a racial quota, when they are completely different," she said.

"They don't involve the use of race in individual decisions at all."

The term "diversity hire" is often used to imply a person was hired only to fill a diversity quota, rather than because of their qualifications.

### What do DEI policies look like?

DEI programs can take several forms, including:

- Employee training
- Promoting pay equity
- Offering scholarships to develop skills in under-represented communities

As an example of how those may look in practice, here are some initiatives Google has implemented in its workplaces:

- A training program to help hiring managers better assess candidates with disabilities or neurodivergence
- Working with people with disabilities to improve accessibility in workplaces
- Providing resources and support for new hires from diverse backgrounds, including connection with peers across the company
- Company participation in LGBT+ events

### What's the justification for DEI policies in the US?

Supporters of DEI programs say they are needed to **close employment and wage gaps** caused by historical and generational inequity.

The American Civil Liberties Union says such programs are "essential to creating environments where everyone has a chance to succeed and **addressing persistent barriers for individuals to advance in their careers**". While women make up 55.4 per cent of the US workforce, their wages equal just 83.6 per cent of men's. Unemployment rates in the US are higher among Americans with disabilities across all age groups. In December, 7.3 per cent of Americans with a disability were unemployed, compared with 3.4 per cent for those with no disability.

Unemployment rates are also higher among black (6.1 per cent) and Hispanic or Latino (5.1 per cent) populations than among white (3.6 per cent) populations. Black, Hispanic or Latino workers generally earn less than US workers overall, too. Data published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2024 showed the median weekly earnings for these population groups were \$959 and \$902, respectively, compared with \$1,177 for white populations.

A 2021 Pew Research Center survey found Black Americans saw barriers to working in STEM fields, including an unwelcoming professional environment and the need for more mentorship and representation for young people.

These are some of the barriers that DEI programs aim to address.

Such programs have also had proven financial benefits for businesses.

A 2023 report by consulting firm McKinsey & Company found companies with diverse leadership teams were associated with higher financial returns. "The business case for gender diversity on executive teams has more than doubled over the past decade," McKinsey & Company said in its report. The findings indicate companies in the top quartile for gender and ethnic diversity were 39 per cent more likely to outperform their bottom-quartile peers.

### **Why are Republicans against DEI?**

Scrapping diversity and inclusion policies was high on the agenda for Republicans when Mr Trump took office again.

Shortly after being inaugurated on January 20, the president signed an executive order targeting DEI programs in government departments. He called it Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI programs and Preferencing. In that document, Mr Trump said these plans resulted in "immense public waste and shameful discrimination" and ordered that:

"Federal employment practices, including federal employee performance reviews, shall reward individual initiative, skills, performance, and hard work and shall not under any circumstances consider DEI or [diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility] factors, goals, policies, mandates, or requirements."

He, and many Republicans, say the policies promote "discrimination" because they encourage employers to promote or hire applicants based on their race or sex.

Many have also suggested DEI programs cause employers to hire unqualified people, lowering standards of workforces.

Mr Trump and his allies have also blamed, without offering evidence, diversity efforts for the handling of recent deadly California wildfires and the recent Washington air crash.

But this appears to be confusing DEI programs with historical examples of affirmative action, as it suggests people have been given roles based on their racial or gender identities, rather than their qualifications.

Regardless, Everett Kelley, the national president of the American Federation of Government Employees, said the government was already hiring and promoting exclusively based on merit. "The results are clear: a diverse federal workforce that looks like the nation it serves, with the lowest gender and racial pay gaps in the country. We should all be proud of that," Mr Kelley said in a statement.

### **When did DEI policies start?**

The concept has **been around for decades**.

But in his executive order, Mr Trump referenced an executive order Mr Biden signed on his first day as president back in 2021. That was called the "Executive Order On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government".

Mr Biden called it a: "...comprehensive approach to advancing equity for all, including people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality."

But his wasn't the first policy promoting diversity and inclusion.

Former president John F Kennedy Jr issued an executive order on affirmative action back in 1961. That required government contractors to treat employees "without regard to their race, creed, colour or national origin". By the mid-1960s, many companies had begun incorporating diversity training in their business strategies. That all coincided with the US civil rights movement.

In his final book, published in 1967, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr appeared to support measures such as affirmative action, writing: "A society that has done something special against the Negro for hundreds of years must now do something special for the Negro."