

Issues & Controversies

Anti-Racism

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INTRODUCTION

Acknowledging and aggressively addressing the role systemic racism, anti-Black bias, and white privilege have played and continue to play in the United States are essential to reducing racial injustice. More awareness—not less—of how race affects each person's experience of the world is the way forward.

The anti-racist movement's over-emphasis on race is only worsening and prolonging racial divisions in the United States. Vague denunciations of systemic racism and baseless accusations of prejudice will do nothing to reduce disparities between Black and white Americans. Color-blindness, not race-consciousness, is the way forward.

In early January 2024, Claudine Gay, the first Black president of Harvard University, resigned. Over the previous weeks, Gay had suffered a hailstorm of criticism for, detractors charged, failing to adequately denounce antisemitism on campus when she testified at a congressional hearing the previous month. She had also struggled to defend herself against accusations that she failed to properly attribute others' writing in her early scholarship. Though the uproar surrounding Gay—and her eventual ousting—stemmed from a variety of criticisms, it was also in part fueled by conservative activists who objected to Gay's appointment as a regrettable outcome of the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) movement.

DEI initiatives, in general, promote the inclusion and elevation in a company or institution of people from groups that have been historically marginalized or oppressed. On a college campus, for example, DEI initiatives could include admissions and hiring policies that attempt to recruit students and professors from backgrounds often underrepresented on campus—such as people of color, people with disabilities, or people in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community—as well as the creation of affinity groups, mentoring and tutoring programs, and other projects to ensure that students and staff feel included and have opportunities for educational and professional advancement.

Supporters of DEI and closely related affirmative action initiatives assert that diversity benefits everybody at a college or corporation while reducing gaps in opportunity, power, and wealth among racial and other groups, but opponents charge that such initiatives discriminate against whites and even high-performing, though still historically persecuted groups, like Asian and Jewish Americans, while promoting undeserving and underqualified candidates—like, her critics would argue, Gay herself—to positions of authority. DEI programs promote an unhelpfully simplistic "oppressor/oppressed framework" that is "inherently racist," Bill Ackman, a prominent financier who has been vocal about some political issues, wrote on X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, after Gay's resignation. In a *Wall Street Journal* editorial the same week, Christopher Rufo, another conservative activist who had criticized Gay, similarly condemned DEI in higher education as a "bureaucracy...constructed to" keep "conservatives out of the professoriate." Rufo had become a national political figure through his campaign to stop schools from teaching critical race theory—a decades-old legal framework that analyzes how race and racism shape U.S. law and society. The campaign against critical race theory has prompted several conservative-leaning states to pass laws restricting certain race-related material from schools in recent years, leading to waves of text removals from classrooms and school libraries that critics condemn as illiberal and narrowminded book bans. [See [Book Bans](#)]

Attacks against DEI and critical race theory, however, are only parts of a much broader dispute within the "anti-racist" movement, a loose coalition of writers, activists, and scholars who argue that racism continues to pervade the United States, reducing opportunities for Black Americans and others while upholding the privileged status of white Americans. (Though the anti-racist movement has focused on all people of color in the United States, much of it has centered on discrimination against Black Americans in particular, as will this article.)

Though progressives have long wrestled with how to best address the United States' legacy of racism, anti-racist thinking was thrust into the national spotlight following the death of George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man who was killed in May 2020 when a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, knelt on his neck as Floyd protested he could not breathe. Floyd's death triggered weeks of protests and riots in cities across the country and fueled what many called a nationwide reckoning on race and racism in the United States. Amid this national conversation, many colleges, corporations, and other institutions made public statements committing themselves to promoting diversity and combatting racism and launched a variety of initiatives to follow through on those promises. Since then, however, these moves have triggered a fierce backlash, culture wars, and targeted campaigns to dismantle affirmative action, DEI programs, and other anti-racist initiatives by those who view such programs as ingrainning problematic race-based thinking. Others have questioned whether such initiatives have yielded any quantifiable progress or are just window dressing that attempts to paper over deeper inequities. [See [Police Brutality and Reform](#)]

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines *anti-racist* as simply being "opposed to racism." *The Oxford English Dictionary*, similarly, defines *anti-racism* as "the policy or practice of opposing racism and promoting racial tolerance." Anti-racist activists and thinkers, however, tend to define *anti-racism* more expansively. Ibram X. Kendi, author of two bestselling books on racism—*Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (2016) and *How to Be an Antiracist* (2019)—and one of the most prominent thinkers in the anti-racist movement, defines an *anti-racist* as one who supports anti-racist policy, which he in turn defines as "any measure that produces or sustains racial equity [fairness or equality of opportunity] between racial groups." Kendi defines a *racist*, on the other hand, as anyone who supports a racist policy, which he writes is "any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups." Ijeoma Oluo, author of the bestselling anti-racist work *So You Want to Talk About Race* (2018), defined *anti-racism* on Twitter in 2019 as "the commitment to fight racism wherever you find it, including in yourself." Malini Ranganathan, faculty director of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University, told *Vox* in 2020 that *anti-racism* consists of "taking stock of and eradicating policies that are racist, that have racist outcomes," and "making sure that ultimately, we're working towards a much more egalitarian...society."

Violence and discrimination against and oppression of Black Americans have pervaded much of U.S. history, but the country has also seen great progress in race relations, from the Civil War that, after the death of approximately 750,000 Americans, led to the end of slavery; to the hard-won civil rights advances of the mid-20th century that dismantled legal systems of segregation and discrimination; to the development and spread of affirmative action programs that in the late 20th and early 21st centuries increased the representation of Black Americans in universities and in well-paying professions; to the recognition in the first two decades of the 21st century by many policy makers that the long-waged war on drugs, which had led to the disproportionate incarceration of Black Americans, had failed both politically and morally. In recent decades, more Black Americans have secured influential positions in government, and the gap between the rate of Black and white Americans earning college degrees has decreased significantly. More generally, giving voice to blatantly racist ideas has become socially and politically unacceptable to a degree that was not true for much of U.S. history.

Few would disagree, however, that American society is still marred by persistent disparities between Black and white Americans. Black unemployment is consistently higher than white unemployment. Black Americans are underrepresented in high-paying jobs and earn less on average than white workers. Black households have less wealth than white households, have higher levels of student loans, and have lower levels of social mobility between generations. In 2022, white families in the United States had a median household wealth of \$285,000, compared to \$44,900 in Black households. Black Americans suffer from infant mortality and cancer at higher rates than white Americans and are twice as likely as white Americans to lack health insurance. Black Americans applying for credit cards or mortgages to purchase homes are more likely to be rejected or saddled with high interest rates. Though Black Americans make up only about 14 percent of the U.S. population, they account for about 39 percent of the nation's prison population. Black men are approximately five times more likely to be imprisoned than white men—a discrepancy that increases even more for young Black men. While more white people die at the hands of law enforcement every year than Black people, police kill Black Americans at a much higher rate.

Indeed, the idea that there are real disparities, on average, between the Black and white experience of living in the United States is not in dispute. What is in dispute, however, is to what extent those disparities result from anti-Black discrimination and to what extent a concerted anti-racism campaign like that embraced by activists like Kendi is capable

of solving the problem. Anti-racist proponents frequently assert the existence of "systemic" or "institutional" racism—defined generally as discrimination against African Americans and other people of color in how society divides power and affords opportunities in areas including education, employment, health care, housing, and politics. The traditional perception of racism as explicit hatred toward or intentional mistreatment of people on the basis of their race, anti-racist activists argue, simply fails to account for the way more subtle forms of discrimination work over time to perpetuate racial inequities in the United States.

Others, however, have objected to the expanding definition of racism and assert that the mere existence of disparities between racial groups does not prove the existence of systemic racism. Matthew Franck, associate director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University, described the systemic racism thesis in *Public Discourse* magazine in 2020 as "a conspiracy theory with no conspirators, an unfalsifiable, undeniable thesis about the purported racism of 'the system' of American life" that saddles the population with a general collective guilt and puts "any of us non-racists who deny our guilt" on the same moral plane as "the few remaining actual racists" in the United States.

Indeed, Kendi and other prominent anti-racists have received criticism for what opponents deem a shallow, one-dimensional and unnecessarily divisive worldview. In a 2020 article in *American Mind*, Jacob Howland, a white philosophy professor at the University of Tulsa, criticized what he viewed as Kendi's tendency to deal in "great struggles of good and evil, light and darkness, purity and pollution." John McWhorter, a linguistics professor at Columbia University, who is Black but whom Kendi has accused of having "racist ideas," said during a podcast interview the same year with Brown University economist Glenn Loury, another Black intellectual who has at times been critical of the anti-racist movement, that Kendi preaches "undercooked, simplistic ideas" that people are afraid to disagree with for fear of being labeled racist.

Critics have taken particular issue with what they see as anti-racists' assumption that anti-Black racism is so ingrained, so baked into the essence of the country, that forming a truly color-blind society is a naive pipe dream. That assumption, opponents contend, is reductive, counterproductive, and needlessly pessimistic. Author Coleman Hughes, who is African American and published *The End of Race: Arguments for a Colorblind America* in 2024, has described the clash between anti-racists and skeptics of the movement as the latest incarnation of two competing visions for race relations in the United States that stretch back to the civil rights era of the mid-20th century. Civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., Hughes wrote for the Manhattan Institute, a think tank, in 2020, embraced a "colorblind" vision for the future of race relations that "looked forward to a day when...race would be seen as an insignificant attribute." Leaders of the Black Power movement of the 1960s, on the other hand, embraced a "race-conscious vision" that demanded "that black people, understood as a collective, receive more recognition, more respect, and more resources" and deemed "racial harmony...an afterthought." The modern anti-racist movement, Hughes wrote, more accurately reflects the latter paradigm by viewing "the goal of getting past race" as "precisely what has prevented us from implementing the race-conscious policies that would meaningfully address racial inequality." Critics of the anti-racist movement see its continuing emphasis on race as forming precisely the same obstacle.

Will the anti-racist movement help reduce inequities between Black and white Americans?

Supporters of the anti-racist movement argue that, for too long, Americans—particularly white Americans—have failed to adequately acknowledge the extent to which anti-Black discrimination has shaped the history of the country and continues to affect the daily lives of Black Americans. Systemic racism is real, consequential, and yields racial injustices and inequities in complex and myriad ways, they contend, and the only way to uproot the racial hierarchy that has formed in the United States is through the committed pursuit of anti-racist policies that establish not only equality of opportunity but also equality of outcome. The willingness of white Americans to examine how their own privilege (the benefits and advantages they enjoy in life as a result of their skin color) and unconscious biases perpetuate racial disparities, they assert, will play a crucial role in this pursuit. The call for color-blindness, they insist, is naive and unhelpful.

Opponents of the anti-racist movement argue that its overly vague prescriptions, demands for white professions of guilt, and insistence on portraying Black people as victims will do nothing to improve the lives of African Americans and will instead further divide the country and undermine political support for the concrete policy changes that actually would. The broad and unselective charges of racism constantly levied by the anti-racist movement, they contend, have injected hysteria and fear into conversations surrounding race. Creating a system where outcomes are equal between racial groups, as anti-racists call for, is simply not possible without discriminating against other minority groups, opponents assert. Through its insistent emphasis on the color of a person's skin, they maintain, anti-racism merely perpetuates the same

simplistic and damaging conceptions of race embraced by white supremacists. To truly move past racism, they argue, the country must finally discard the concept of race as the retrograde invention it is.

Overview

Chattel Slavery and Anti-Black Racism in Early U.S. History

Race and racism helped shape the Western Hemisphere long before the United States declared its independence from Great Britain in 1776. The first group of enslaved people brought from Africa to North America in the transatlantic slave trade arrived in the Caribbean in the early 1500s, and the first group brought to an English settlement in what would become the United States arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619. European powers had little presence in inland Africa, and slave traders, many of whom were Portuguese, most commonly bought enslaved people at coastal trade outposts from African leaders who had captured members of warring nations and sold them in exchange for weapons and other goods.



Zach Gibson/Getty Images On August 24, 2019, the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first African enslaved persons to an English colony in North America, people take part in a flower petal throwing ceremony to honor Africans who passed away at sea during the Atlantic slave trade

By the mid-19th century, more than 12 million Africans had been sold into slavery in the Western Hemisphere, and several million more had died in the transatlantic passage, during which they were forced to endure cramped and filthy conditions, bondage, hunger, and thirst. Slave traders delivered only a small number of these human cargo—approximately 388,000 individuals—to mainland North America (many more went to the Caribbean and South America), but by 1830 the Black population in the United States had ballooned to 2.3 million, approximately 18 percent of the nation's total population. During the colonial period, slave ownership was common among the wealthy, making it especially predominant among landholders and political leaders, including many of those who would in the late 18th century play a prominent role in the founding of the United States.

Slavery—of people of all races—had thrived for millennia across human civilizations, from ancient Greece and Rome in Europe to empires and societies in western and central Africa to Indigenous groups in the Americas. Globally and historically, the concept of race played little role in the development of slavery. This began changing with the onset of the transatlantic slave trade in the 16th and 17th centuries. The unique perpetuation of chattel slavery—slavery in which a person and their children are wholly owned as property—against Africans in the Western Hemisphere, however, both resulted from and contributed to a relatively new and distinct racial thinking that deemed people with darker skin inherently less worthy of and suited to freedom. "[A]nti-black racist views hardened fairly rapidly and all too easily [in the 17th century], rendering most blacks an alien people and fit subjects for permanent servitude," Henry Louis Gates, a historian of African-American history at Harvard University, wrote in 2016 in *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross*. "Soon...the blackness of a person's skin became a signifier of status, a signal that such people should be considered property and inferior by nature, to be held in perpetual bondage."

Enslavement helped drive economic growth in the colonies even as American colonists demanded greater freedom from Great Britain. Abigail Adams, wife of John Adams, a prominent player in America's bid for independence, wrote to her husband in 1774 that it seemed "a most iniquitous scheme...to fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have." British author Samuel Johnson pointed out the hypocrisy in a similar way, writing in 1775, "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of the negroes?" Enslaved persons also recognized the logical fallacy in colonists' cries for liberty. In 1773, in Massachusetts—a hotbed of revolutionary activity—four enslaved people unsuccessfully petitioned the state for their freedom, writing that they "expected great things from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their fellow-men to enslave them." During the American Revolution (1775–83), two enslaved people in Massachusetts gained their freedom after arguing in court that a clause in the state constitution declaring that "All men are born free and equal" prohibited slavery in the state.

When the American Revolution broke out in 1775, thousands of Black people living in the United States fought alongside American patriots, but many enslaved people sought to capitalize on British promises of freedom by fleeing to enlist with loyalist troops. Many of those who had sought refuge with the British, however, found themselves returned to their owners after the Treaty of Paris, which ended the war in 1783, prohibited the British from "carrying away any Negroes or other property of American inhabitants."

By that time, the abolitionist movement, which sought an end to slavery, had begun to emerge in the United States, particularly in northern states. Groups including the Quaker-founded Pennsylvania Abolition Society and the New York Manumission Society lobbied for the end of the transatlantic slave trade, the abolition of slavery, and the education of Black children. Free Black communities that had formed in cities including Boston, New York, and Philadelphia also helped lead the abolitionist cause. Institutions including the African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in Philadelphia in 1787 by influential Black leader Richard Allen, distributed abolitionist newspapers and, in some cases, helped runaway enslaved people escape to safer territories. Vermont—before it joined the Union—banned slavery in 1777. Three years later, Pennsylvania became the first state to pass a law outlawing slavery, and New England states followed suit over the next decade. Some of these laws, however, provided only for the gradual eradication of slavery. Slavery existed in New York, for example, until several decades into the 19th century.

The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 further entrenched slavery as a major driver of U.S. economic growth, particularly in the South. The machine, which automated the separation of cotton seeds from fibers, paved the way for cotton to become one of the new nation's most valuable crops, one cultivated largely by slave labor. In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson (Democratic-Republican, 1801–09), a slaveowner himself, negotiated the Louisiana Purchase, buying a huge swath of territory stretching from the Mississippi River to what would become Montana. The settlement, or resettlement, of this vast region—assisted by the military's forcible removal of Native Americans—spread U.S. institutions across the continent and led to a growing number of slave states across the South and parts of the Midwest.

Even as slavery continued to decline in the North, booming cotton production in the South ingrained slave labor as an important component of the U.S. economy. By 1860, the enslaved population of the United States had reached 3.9 million. Slave owners rejected the growing abolitionist demands for freedom, arguing that bondage was in fact a merciful condition for Black people who, Christian proponents of slavery purported, bore in the color of their skin proof they had descended from the cursed biblical figure of Ham, and thus, as an "inferior race," needed white oversight.

Even in free states and territories, African Americans faced rampant discrimination and the risk of abduction from kidnappers who sought to sell them into the labor-hungry Deep South. Some states and territories, such as Oregon, prohibited free Black Americans from settling within their borders and rigorously blocked their entry. Conditions were so dire that some Black intellectuals failed to see any kind of desirable future for African Americans in the United States. Martin Delany, a doctor who had been born free in present-day West Virginia in 1812, is considered by some to be the father of Black nationalism. In his 1852 book *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States, Politically Considered*, Delany described African Americans as "a nation within a nation," a class of people "looked upon as inferior to their oppressors...doing the low offices and drudgery of those among whom they lived, moving about and existing by mere sufferance, having no rights nor privileges but those conceded by the common consent of their political superiors." Delany advocated the creation of a territory in Africa where Black Americans, including emancipated enslaved people, could relocate. Among the areas he visited in the pursuit of this vision was Liberia, a colony founded in 1822 by the American Colonization Society, a group that advocated the emigration of Black Americans to Africa.

Other Black leaders, however, pursued the abolition of slavery and the treatment of all Americans as equal under the U.S. Constitution. In addition to white abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison, who ran the radical newspaper the *Liberator*, Black leaders including Allen and James Forten, a wealthy Philadelphia businessman, helped organize abolitionist campaigns. In 1845, Frederick Douglass, who had escaped from slavery in Maryland, published *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. This book and the *North Star*, the newspaper he founded in 1847, inflamed anti-slavery sentiment across much of the country and made Douglass one of the most prominent Black voices in the abolitionist movement.

As leaders like Douglass helped explain the horror of slavery to white America, others advocated violent insurrection. In 1859, for example, Connecticut-born white abolitionist John Brown led a raid on the federal armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, intending to seize weapons with which to arm a massive slave insurrection. Brown was quickly captured and hanged for treason. Many other white and Black abolitionists, meanwhile, risked their lives helping tens of thousands of enslaved people escape via the Underground Railroad, a secret network of safe houses and transportation routes by which enslaved people attempted to flee north to free states, territories, and Canada.

Mere presence in a free state, however, did not bestow freedom, as the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in [*Dred Scott v. Sandford*](#) in 1857. Dred Scott, enslaved by a surgeon in the U.S. Army, had sued for freedom for himself and his family, alleging that because they had lived in free territories for several years their bondage was illegal. The Court rejected this argument, holding that Scott, as a Black person, could not be a citizen and thus had no right to bring his lawsuit in federal court. The authors of the Constitution, Chief Justice Roger Taney wrote, regarded Black individuals "as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race either in social or political relations, and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." As a result, he wrote, African Americans "can therefore claim none of the rights and privileges which [the Constitution] provides." [See [*Dred Scott v. Sandford*, U.S. Supreme Court Decision](#) (primary source)]

The *Dred Scott* decision not only deprived Black Americans of the rights of citizenship, but it also invalidated the Missouri Compromise, a law Congress passed in 1820 that had prohibited the expansion of slavery north of the line of latitude 36°30' (with the sole exception of the new state of Missouri). The Court's ruling essentially barred Congress from outlawing slavery in western territories, a decision that inflamed regional tensions and galvanized abolitionist sentiment in the North. These pressures boiled over in November 1860 with the election of President Abraham Lincoln (R, 1861–65), an opponent of slavery who nevertheless had pledged to preserve it where it still existed. By the time of his inauguration in March 1861, seven Southern states had already seceded from the United States (soon joined by four more) and formed the Confederate States of America, all of which, to varying degrees, cited the preservation of slavery as the reason for their departure. The resulting Civil War (1861–65), fought primarily over slavery, would eventually take approximately 750,000 lives.

Early attempts by Black Americans to enlist in the Union Army and fight for the preservation of the United States met with resistance. "This is a Government of white men," Representative Chilton White (D, Ohio) said in 1861, "made by white men for white men, to be administered, protected, defended and maintained by white men." Staggering casualty counts as the war intensified, however, changed many people's minds, and by the end of the war in 1865 nearly 200,000 African Americans, many of them formerly enslaved, had served in the Union Army.

The U.S. government's policy toward slavery itself also evolved during the course of the war. "If I could save the union without freeing any slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it," President Lincoln wrote in 1862, "and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that." The following year, however, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing all enslaved people in states in "rebellion." The proclamation helped turn the conflict into a war for liberation and undercut sympathy for the Confederacy in Britain and France, which Lincoln feared might intervene in the war on the side of the South.

The United States did not completely abolish slavery, however, until the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in December 1865. The amendment declared, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." Two other constitutional amendments intended to protect the rights of formerly enslaved people quickly followed. The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, granted citizenship to any person born in the United States and prohibited states from denying any person "equal protection of the laws." The Fifteenth Amendment, ratified in 1870, prohibited states from denying any person the right to vote because of their "race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

Long Struggle for Civil Rights Follows Civil War

The period following the Civil War, known as Reconstruction, saw dramatic—though brief—gains for formerly enslaved people in the South, most of whom entered freedom with little or no property, education, or economic opportunity. Shortly before the war ended, Congress established the Freedmen's Bureau to help provide shelter, education, and work for emancipated Americans. In areas under the control of the U.S. Army, Black Southerners also ran for office, both local and national, and over the next few decades, several African Americans—including former enslaved men Joseph Rainey and Robert Smalls—served in Congress.

Access to education, economic opportunity, and the halls of power, however, was short-lived. Some gains were reversed even before Reconstruction ended in 1877. President Andrew Johnson (D, 1865–69), who took office following the assassination of Lincoln by a Confederate sympathizer in April 1865, had been one of the few Southern legislators to remain with the Union following secession, serving as a senator and governor of Tennessee. As president, however, Johnson proved a fierce opponent of civil rights protections for emancipated Black people. In late 1865, for example, he overturned Field Order 15, a command—issued by General William T. Sherman in the last months of the war—that had mandated the redistribution of lands possessed by former slave owners in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina to freed people.

Historians have argued that the revocation of Field Order 15 and subsequent obstacles to landownership affected generations of Black Americans' ability to build wealth. "Imagine the history of race relations in the United States had this policy stood—had the former slaves actually had access to the ownership of land, of property!" Henry Louis Gates wrote in *The African Americans*.

If the former slaves could have achieved economic self-sufficiency, perhaps the entire history of race relations in this country would have been markedly different. One of the principal promises of America has been the possibility of average people enjoying the right and the opportunity to own land, and all that such ownership entails. Historically, it is the principal means by which one generation passes on wealth to subsequent generations in this country.

President Johnson also clashed with so-called Radical Republicans in Congress—like Representatives James Garfield (R, Ohio) and Thaddeus Stevens (R, Pennsylvania)—who sought to empower emancipated Americans by guaranteeing them all the accompanying rights of citizenship. "What is freedom?" Garfield, who would become president in 1881, asked in 1865. "Is it the bare privilege of not being chained? If this is all, then freedom is a bitter mockery, a cruel delusion."

President Johnson fought the Radical Republicans, arguing that they sought to bestow unearned special privileges upon Black Americans. "[T]he policy of the Government from its origin to the present time seems to have been that persons who are strangers to and unfamiliar with our institutions and our laws should pass through a certain probation, at the end of which, before attaining the coveted prize, they must give evidence of their fitness to receive and to exercise the rights of citizens as contemplated by the Constitution of the United States," he wrote when vetoing civil rights legislation in 1866, which granted citizenship and equal protection under the law to emancipated people. "[Measures in the law] establish for the security of the colored race safeguards which go infinitely beyond any that the General Government has ever provided for the white race. In fact, the distinction of race and color is by the bill made to operate in favor of the colored and against the white race." [See [President Andrew Johnson Vetoes Civil Rights Legislation](#) (primary source)]

President Johnson's opposition to civil rights protections for emancipated Americans heartened white supremacists in the South, who worked to erect racial hierarchies in postwar governments. Delegates to a constitutional convention in Louisiana in fall 1865, for example, proclaimed the state "to be a Government of white people, made and to be perpetuated for the exclusive benefit of the white race." Soon after the war, southern states enacted oppressive race-based laws known as Black Codes. These statutes required African Americans to sign annual labor contracts with white employers and deemed those who did not criminal vagrants. Under the Black Codes, authorities arrested thousands of African Americans on flimsy pretenses and auctioned off their labor to white-owned private enterprises like plantations, mines, and lumber mills in a system not vastly dissimilar to slavery itself. Black workers had to seek permission from a court to work in positions other than laborer or domestic help, and some states even prohibited Black residents from fishing or hunting to feed themselves. Other offenses meriting punishment by hard labor included making an offensive gesture or carrying a firearm.

The enforcement of the Black Codes and similar laws across much of the South made it hard if not impossible for Black southerners to live and travel freely, form their own businesses, and participate in the political system, instead transforming the recently freed population into a source of cheap and exploitative source of labor for white men of industry. Many Black southerners also labored under a sharecropping system in which they farmed land they did not own and often ended the year in debt to the landowner, from whom they were required to purchase all their supplies. Violence against formerly enslaved Americans also exploded during Reconstruction as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and other white terrorist groups attacked African Americans trying to vote and assert their constitutional rights. This violence continued after Reconstruction, most visibly in the form of lynchings in which crowds of whites would gather to watch the torture and murder of Black Americans, often men falsely accused of inappropriate behavior toward white women. In addition to Black Codes and widespread violence, states in the South and other parts of the country enacted "Jim Crow" laws—named after an offensive minstrel act—requiring the strict segregation of Black and white people in public accommodations.

Civil rights activists fought racial segregation in the courtroom. After Louisiana passed a law barring Black and white people from sitting in the same car on a train, authorities arrested Homer Plessy, a light-skinned African American, for attempting to sit in a whites-only area. During his trial in 1892, Plessy argued that the law, which required all railroad companies to "provide equal but separate accommodations for the white and colored races," violated his rights under the Fourteenth Amendment, which guaranteed all Americans "equal protection of the laws." The court rejected his argument, and the case, known as [*Plessy v. Ferguson*](#), eventually reached the Supreme Court. If "Justice is pictured blind," Plessy's lawyer Albion Tourg  e insisted, "the Law...ought at least to be color-blind." The Supreme Court, however, upheld the Louisiana law, ruling in 1896 that the separate but equal treatment of white and Black Americans did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment. "A statute which implies merely a legal distinction between the white and colored races—a distinction which is founded in the color of the two races and which must always exist so long as white men are distinguished from the other race by color," Justice Henry Billings Brown wrote in the majority opinion, "has no tendency to destroy the legal equality of the two races." *Plessy v. Ferguson* provided judicial justification for racial segregation in the United States for the next half-century. [See [*Plessy v. Ferguson*, U.S. Supreme Court Decision](#) (primary source)]

Black Codes, lynchings, and segregation all contributed to the Great Migration, one of the largest movements of a population in U.S. history. From the 1890s to the 1970s, approximately 6 million Black Americans moved from the South to the North, Midwest, and West in search of greater economic opportunities and equal treatment under the law. The first two decades of the 20th century in particular saw an explosion in the Black populations of cities including Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, New York, and Philadelphia.

Black leaders, meanwhile, debated how best to advance the battle for civil rights. Booker T. Washington, who had been born into slavery in Virginia in 1856 and later became a prominent educator and intellectual, often argued that African Americans should temporarily set aside their quest for equal political rights and instead focus on economic advancement. Financial success and independence, he asserted, would eventually win the respect of white America and lead to the end of white supremacism and anti-Black discrimination. "Ignorant and inexperienced, it is not strange that in the first years of our new life we began at the top instead of at the bottom; that a seat in Congress or the state legislature was more sought than real estate or industrial skill; that the political convention or stump speaking had more attractions than starting a dairy farm or truck garden," he said in a speech in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1895. "Our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands, and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labour, and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life." [See [*Booker T. Washington Delivers Atlanta Compromise Speech*](#) (primary source)]



Library of Congress/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images Booker T. Washington (bottom second from left) poses with other members of the National Negro Business League Executive Committee, a group founded to promote economic advancement among Black Americans.

W. E. B. Du Bois, a sociologist and civil rights activist born in Massachusetts shortly after the Civil War, criticized Washington's approach. Black Americans had "stood" but "a brief moment in the sun" during Reconstruction, he lamented in 1935, before "moving back again toward slavery." Unlike Washington, Du Bois believed that Black Americans must demand civil rights—including the unequivocal right to vote, an end to the discrimination and segregation of Jim Crow, and equal treatment under the law—through political agitation. "We refuse to surrender the leadership of this race to cowards and trucklers [ones who fawn or grovel before others]," he said in a speech in 1905. "We are men; we will be treated as men." Four years later, Du Bois helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a group that would spearhead the fight for civil rights for the rest of the century and remains influential today.

Both Washington and Du Bois faced reproach, meanwhile, from Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican-born political activist who fought against Jim Crow but argued that it was unlikely white Americans would ever treat Black Americans as their equals. Garvey asserted that self-separation, perhaps by forming exile communities in Africa, would be a more advantageous course. Garvey stoked widespread condemnation from other Black leaders in 1922, when he met with the leader of the KKK, the white supremacist organization responsible for horrendous campaigns of violence and intimidation against Black Americans, particularly in the South. The following year, Garvey defended this meeting, writing that the KKK leaders who straightforwardly expressed their hatred of Black people were "better friends of the race than all other hypocritical whites put together."

Civil Rights Gains for Black Americans Yield Late 20th-Century Backlash

The entry of the United States into World War II (1939–45) against Nazi Germany in 1941 cast further light on the unequal treatment of Black Americans in American society. Approximately 1.2 million African Americans served in the war, but mostly in undesirable jobs without the same opportunities for promotions and combat as white military personnel. At home, growing industrial demand for labor drew many Black Americans to cities such as Detroit, where their competition with working-class whites for factory jobs and housing sometimes boiled over into strikes and racially motivated violence. Black leaders launched a "Double V"—or Double Victory—campaign that highlighted the absurdity of Black service members risking their lives to fight for democracy and freedom abroad but often receiving unequal rights and treatment at home. The NAACP, meanwhile, launched a series of court cases challenging segregation on constitutional grounds and bringing attention to the discrimination Black Americans faced under Jim Crow.

Shortly before World War II ended, Congress passed the G.I. Bill of Rights to help returning soldiers transition back to civilian life. The U.S. government, however, often excluded Black veterans from the same benefits provided to white veterans. Among the most prominent manifestations of this disparate treatment was in housing. Many communities, both in cities and in the growing suburbs, barred African Americans from buying houses. Black Americans also faced rampant

redlining—the process by which banks refused to offer and the federal government refused to guarantee housing loans to Black buyers. Purchasing property had long been one of the primary ways families in the United States built wealth and passed it on from generation to generation, and many historians and economists have argued that the obstacles Black people faced in buying land and homes in the mid-20th century played a major role in the persistence of economic inequality between white and Black Americans.

Segregation and disparities also pervaded education. Local and state governments in the South and other parts of the country frequently spent multiple times more on white schools than Black ones, and by the mid-20th century millions of Black southerners still had only a few years of formal education. The NAACP and other organizations, however, persistently targeted this injustice in court. The campaign for racial integration gained a far-reaching victory in 1954, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled unanimously in [*Brown v. Board of Education*](#) that segregation in public schools violated the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution because, as Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote for the majority in a nod to *Plessy*, "[s]eparate educational facilities are inherently unequal." [See [*Brown v. Board of Education*, U.S. Supreme Court](#) (primary source)]

Brown v. Board of Education, however, prompted protests and outright defiance from segregationists and white parents who in some cases preferred to see local schools shut down rather than integrated. In many school districts around the country, desegregation in the decades following the decision was torturously slow. Southern legislators like Senator Strom Thurmond (D, South Carolina), who had run for president in 1948, accused the federal government of trampling on states' rights and disregarding the needs and wishes of white southern Americans. "The white people of the South are the greatest minority in this nation," he said following the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown*. "They deserve consideration and understanding instead of the persecution of twisted propaganda."

Black and white civil rights activists, meanwhile, continued to protest segregation in other areas of public life. In 1955, police in Montgomery, Alabama, arrested Rosa Parks, a Black woman, for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white man. The incident spurred a year-long bus boycott in which Black residents refused to patronize the city's bus system until it became integrated. The boycott ended when the Supreme Court upheld a lower court's decision striking down racially segregated seating as unconstitutional. The campaign helped launch Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. as one of the civil rights movement's foremost proponents of nonviolent civil disobedience. Urging peaceful resistance to unjust laws, King was determined, he told reporters in 1956, to use the "weapon of love" to fight racism and oppression.

Following the Montgomery Bus Boycott, civil rights protesters conducted sit-ins, marches, and other efforts to integrate local facilities, including schools, restaurants, and transportation. Counterprotesters often attacked participants violently, and some police used brutal methods to block demonstrations. As King's stature grew, some African-American leaders criticized his commitment to nonviolence and alliance-building with white Americans. Among them were Black nationalist Malcolm X, who rose to political prominence through the Nation of Islam, a religious group that preached Black supremacy, and Stokely Carmichael, who played key roles in both the Black Power movement, which advocated Black self-sufficiency and nationalism, and the Black Panther Party, which formed armed citizens patrols to prevent police brutality in cities like Oakland, California. "The white man supports Reverend Martin Luther King, subsidizes Reverend Martin Luther King, so that Reverend Martin Luther King can continue to teach the Negroes to be defenseless," Malcolm X said in an interview in 1959. "[T]hat's what you mean by nonviolent—be defenseless in the face of one of the most cruel beasts that has ever taken people into captivity—that's this American white man, and they have proved it throughout the country by the police dogs and the police clubs."

Carmichael had initially backed King's commitment to nonviolence, but as civil rights protesters faced ongoing attacks—and even assassination—he explicitly disavowed it. He coined the terms *Black power* in 1966 and *institutional racism* in 1967. "Racism is both overt and covert," he wrote in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*. "It takes two, closely related forms: individual whites acting against individual blacks, and acts by the total white community against the black community. We call these individual racism and institutional racism."

King returned the criticism directed at him from leaders within the Black nationalist movement. "Black supremacy is as dangerous as white supremacy," he said in a speech at DePauw University in 1960. "God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race and the creation of a society where all men will live together as brothers, and all men will respect the dignity and the worth of all human personality." The assassinations of Malcolm X in 1965 and Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, however, fueled further skepticism among some Black Americans over whether a nonviolent approach to securing civil rights would ever truly yield equal treatment and opportunity in American society.

Despite these concerns, sit-ins, marches, speeches, and public dialogue stirred by the rhetoric of leaders like King and Malcolm X spurred concrete policy changes. In 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, prohibiting discrimination and segregation on the basis of race in education, public facilities, employment, and housing. The law created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to enforce anti-discriminatory hiring measures and the Office of Civil Rights within the U.S. Department of Education to accelerate the desegregation of schools. The following year, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, which banned poll taxes, literacy tests, and other barriers to voting that some states had erected to disenfranchise African Americans. The Voting Rights Act, enforced by federal oversight in jurisdictions with particularly egregious records of voter discrimination, dramatically increased the Black vote and the prevalence of Black elected officials.

In addition to taking steps to defend Black Americans' right to vote, the federal government also embraced the use of affirmative action to improve educational and career opportunities for people of color. Presidents John F. Kennedy (D, 1961–63) and Lyndon Johnson (D, 1963–69) both pushed federal contractors to implement affirmative action hiring policies that expanded access to jobs long denied to African Americans and other groups. In the second half of the 20th century, the number of Black Americans in institutions of higher learning and serving as doctors, lawyers, elected officials, and in other prestigious positions rose significantly. [See [Affirmative Action](#)]

Affirmative action policies, however, also stoked legal challenges from those who argued that they perpetrated reverse discrimination against white applicants. In 1978, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the [Regents of the University of California v. Bakke](#) that though colleges could consider the race of applicants when determining admission, they could not implement racial quotas with a fixed number of admissions reserved for people of minority descent. In his opinion in the case—one of four separate opinions—Justice Harry Blackmun defended the concept of affirmative action in general. "In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race," he wrote. "There is no other way. And in order to treat some persons equally, we must treat them differently." [See [Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, U.S. Supreme Court Decision](#) (primary source)]

Amid these civil rights gains, some politicians attempted to harness resentment over affirmative action, civil rights legislation, and desegregation for their own political gain. In what became known as the "Southern Strategy," a succession of southern Democrats and Republicans appealed to disaffected white working- and middle-class voters by suggesting, with various degrees of subtlety, that liberal politicians had wrongly prioritized the special treatment of Black Americans over the white majority. Historians have argued that several prominent presidential candidates in the late 20th century—including George Wallace (D) in 1964, 1968, and 1972, Richard Nixon (R) in 1968 and 1972, Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984, and Patrick Buchanan (R) in 1992 and 1996—employed various versions of the Southern Strategy. Courted in this way, large numbers of southern and rural Democrats began to vote Republican during the late 20th century, often, Democrats contended, against their own economic interest.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, economic uncertainty magnified these tensions. As corporations outsourced thousands of once well-paying and secure factory jobs to other countries where labor was cheaper, the manufacturing industry declined in the United States. This decline hit African-American urban communities particularly hard, as factories had long provided the best job opportunities for city dwellers without college degrees. Accompanying this dwindling of jobs in many American cities were rising crime rates and "white flight," the movement of many middle-class white families to the suburbs, which further drained cities of tax revenue and economic vitality. Economic inequality between Black and white Americans widened during this period; in 1970, Black Americans earned approximately 71 cents per every dollar earned by white Americans. By the end of the decade, they were earning 58 cents for every dollar.

Economic challenges and uncertainty for low-income Black Americans increased during the presidency of Ronald Reagan (R, 1981–89), who argued that many of the social safety nets and welfare programs put in place by previous administrations were eroding Americans' commitment to self-sufficiency and hard work. During the 1980s, the Reagan administration and Congress cut welfare spending, rolled back government regulations, fought labor unions, and instituted tax cuts. Conservatives argued that these changes spurred economic growth across the country, but liberals contended that they made life more financially precarious for working-class and financially insecure Americans, including Black Americans. After declining through the 1960s and 1970s, Black unemployment skyrocketed in the early 1980s, reaching a record high at that time of 19.5 percent in 1983.

School districts, meanwhile, were still struggling to integrate, a feat made harder by the continuing de facto racial segregation of many neighborhoods by race and income. Efforts to accelerate school desegregation via "busing"—assigning some students to schools outside their neighborhoods—sparked fervent opposition from white Americans. A 1974 federal court order to implement busing in Boston, for example, triggered violent protests from white residents of

the city. To some, battles over busing throughout the country revealed the limited willingness of white Americans to make sacrifices in the name of civil rights. "[T]he white 'silent majority'... was ready to stop making concessions to African Americans, becoming nervous about protecting their own economic interests as the economy began to stall and the country's coffers shrink," Gates wrote in *The African Americans*. "While a small black middle class continued to make impressive progress, the urban poor found it increasingly difficult to break out of ghettos that grew more entrenched, hopeless, and dangerous."



Ed Jenner/The Boston Globe via Getty Images Demonstrators dressed as Ku Klux Klan members protest a busing initiative to desegregate Boston public schools in 1974.

The consequences of a crackdown on crime, meanwhile, landed particularly heavily on African-American communities. A national "war on drugs" launched by the Nixon administration in the early 1970s intensified during the administrations of Presidents Reagan, George H. W. Bush (R, 1989–1993), and Bill Clinton (D, 1993–2001) as Congress instituted lengthy mandatory minimum sentences for relatively minor drug offenses and allocated more resources to fighting the illegal drug trade. Continuing poverty and a scarcity of jobs in low-income urban areas, meanwhile, led many young Black Americans to join the violent—and, for some, lucrative—drug trade. From 1984 to 1994, the homicide rate for Black teenage males aged 14–17 more than doubled.

The popularity of crack cocaine, a cheaper form of cocaine, in the 1980s and 1990s escalated public alarm surrounding drug crimes and helped fuel a penal crackdown that—though both Black and white Americans used and sold the drug—disproportionately affected African Americans. The prison population in the United States exploded in the last decades of the 20th century, and those who were convicted of drug and other felonies faced lifetime repercussions, including ineligibility for food stamps, public housing, and other forms of state assistance as well as, in some states, the right to vote and serve on juries. The effect of mass incarceration on poor Black communities in the United States was so pronounced that legal scholar, civil rights activist, and author Michelle Alexander has dubbed it the "new Jim Crow." High-profile violent interactions between Black communities and law enforcement, meanwhile, fueled resentment and charges of police brutality. In 1992, for example, four white Los Angeles Police Department officers viciously beat Black motorist Rodney King, an incident caught on video. Despite this evidence, an all-white jury acquitted them, sparking days of rioting in Los Angeles.

Accusations of disparate treatment and systemic racism continued into the 21st century. A bungled federal response to Hurricane Katrina, which killed more than 1,800 people—many of them poor and Black—in and around New Orleans, Louisiana, in 2005 sparked further allegations among some Black Americans that the government, in the words of hip-hop artist Kanye West, "doesn't care about Black people." Many of the city's low-income Black residents had lacked the means to evacuate ahead of the storm, and when the levees broke, flooding New Orleans, thousands of people were left for days without food and clean water. President George W. Bush (R, 2001–09), who did not visit the site of the disaster until more than two weeks after the flood, acknowledged in a speech that poverty in Black neighborhoods in the city "had roots in a history of racial discrimination which cut off generations from the opportunity of America." A public survey

poll undertaken by political scientist Melissa Harris-Perry in the aftermath of the catastrophe found that a majority of African Americans believed the government response to the disaster would have been better if more of the victims had been white. A majority of white Americans, on the other hand, thought the race of the victims played no part in the Bush administration's bureaucratic failures.

America's First Black President Succeeded by President Repeatedly Accused of Racism

The election of Barack Obama (D, 2009–17), an Illinois senator, as the first African-American president of the United States, in 2008 marked to many a major turning point for race relations in the country. In the wake of his victory, some argued that the United States had finally surpassed its history of racial oppression and become a "post-racial" nation. Issues of race, however, had prompted debate during Obama's campaign and would continue to incite national discussion throughout his two terms in office.

While campaigning for the presidency, for example, Obama faced an uproar over controversial comments made by his pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, who had said, among other inflammatory statements, "God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human." In response to the backlash, Obama delivered a nuanced speech on race in the United States at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. Though anger such as that voiced by Reverend Wright was "not always productive," he said, it was "real," and "to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races." [See [Senator Barack Obama Delivers Campaign Speech on Race Relations in the United States](#) (primary source)]

White Americans, Obama noted in his speech, also experienced racial anger. "Most working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race," he said.

They've worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pensions dumped after a lifetime of labor. They are anxious about their futures, and they feel their dreams slipping away. And in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense. So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear an African-American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed; when they're told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time.

In November 2008, Obama defeated Senator John McCain (R, Arizona) in the general election, partially thanks to a record high turnout of Black voters. Black women in particular came out to vote at a higher rate than any other racial, ethnic, or gender group. That trend amplified in 2012, when President Obama won reelection against former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney. That year, Black voter participation outpaced white turnout; approximately 66 percent of Black voters cast ballots in that election, compared to 64 percent of non-Hispanic whites.

By that time, however, many states had begun enacting voting laws that restricted access to the ballot box. Some states purged their voter rolls of individuals who officials alleged were not citizens or had otherwise illegally registered to vote. Ahead of the 2012 election, for example, Florida removed 180,000 people from its registries, 75 percent of whom were either Black or Hispanic. From 2011 to 2013, 11 states passed voter ID laws requiring voters to present state-issued identification before casting ballots. Supporters of such laws argued that they were necessary to prevent election fraud, while opponents argued that they would disproportionately affect poor, rural, Black voters for whom obtaining and paying for a government ID could be challenging. Other states undertook redistricting in ways that critics alleged were intended to marginalize minority voters. [See [Voting Rights](#)]

In some cases, the U.S. Department of Justice used its authority under the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to reject voting procedures it deemed discriminatory. In 2013, in [Shelby County v. Holder](#), however, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a key provision of the Voting Rights Act, essentially quashing the Justice Department's oversight authority. Soon after this ruling, an array of states—including Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, Kansas, Mississippi, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia—passed voting regulations legislators asserted were essential to protecting election integrity, but which critics contended were designed to minimize the effect Black votes had on electoral outcomes. [See [Shelby County v. Holder, U.S. Supreme Court Decision](#) (primary source)]

Obama's presidency saw repeated national reckonings over issues of race. Fatal shootings of unarmed Black men by police officers and vigilantes—including the 2012 shooting of Black teenager Trayvon Martin by a neighborhood watch

volunteer; the 2014 killing of Eric Garner, who was put in a chokehold by a New York City Police Department officer while being arrested for selling loose cigarettes; and the 2014 lethal shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old Black man, by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri—fueled the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, which argued that American society, and in particular law enforcement, had systematically devalued the lives of Black Americans. Critics of the Black Lives Matter movement—some of whom countered with "Blue Lives Matter," in reference to a color commonly used for police uniforms, or "All Lives Matter"—accused it of being unnecessarily racially divisive and stressed that most cops were good people who regularly risked their lives in service of the public. Black Lives Matter later received further criticism after reporting revealed leaders of an organization titled after the movement spent charitable donations on mansions and personal expenses.

President Obama's first term also saw the rise of the Tea Party, a relatively short-lived anti-big government political movement that emerged in opposition to economic recovery and health care measures backed by the Obama administration. Critics of the Tea Party accused the movement of trafficking in racist caricatures. A poster photographed at one Tea Party rally, for example, depicted the president as a tribal witch doctor. In July 2010, the NAACP passed a resolution condemning the movement's "continued tolerance for bigotry and bigoted statements." Tea Party spokespersons denied charges of racism. A *New York Times* survey of Tea Party supporters in 2010 found that a majority of them believed "too much has been made of the problems of black people." Another poll, conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute, a think tank, the same year found that 62 percent of Tea Party members and 56 percent of white Republicans believed that discrimination against white people had become as big of a problem as discrimination against Black people. Some liberals warned that, if the Democratic Party focused too much on race issues as opposed to class, it risked alienating larger and larger portions of the white electorate. [See [Identity Politics](#)]

President Obama also faced personal racist attacks, including the spread of conspiracy theories claiming he was secretly a Muslim terrorist or an extreme Black nationalist. Some conspiracy theorists, known as "birthers," charged that he had not even been born in the United States, which would have made him ineligible for the presidency under the U.S. Constitution. In a 2014 paper, Philip Klinkner, a professor of political science at Hamilton College, found a strong correlation between birtherism and racial resentment. "[B]irthers...interpreted President Obama's policies in highly racialized terms," he wrote. "When asked whether they believed that President Obama's policies had helped or hurt various groups, large majorities of non-birthers believed that both blacks and whites had been helped by President Obama's policies. On the other hand, birthers overwhelmingly perceived that Obama's policies had helped blacks but not whites."

At the forefront of this birther movement was Donald Trump, a real estate businessman and political outsider who would go on to run for and—to the surprise of many observers—win the Republican nomination for president in 2016. Accusations of racism dogged the Trump campaign. In a February 2016 interview with journalist Jake Tapper, for example, Trump declined to disavow an endorsement given to him by former KKK leader David Duke because he did not "know anything" about Duke and had "never met him." His campaign also more than once retweeted messages that white supremacists and Nazi sympathizers had posted on Twitter.

Throughout the campaign, Trump presented himself as the "law and order" candidate, a strategy most notably used by Nixon during his 1968 run for the presidency amid record unrest, massive protests, and urban riots. Unlike Nixon, however, Trump was running for president at a time when—with the exception of localized spikes in violence in certain cities, including Chicago—crime rates in the United States were at record lows. Critics of Trump's strategy interpreted his embrace of law and order—as well as his pledge to "Make America Great Again"—as dog-whistles to white voters who felt they had suffered a loss of privilege and prominence in American society and political discourse. Trump's defenders, on the other hand, accused Democrats of prioritizing political correctness and identity politics over the real economic anxieties and pain faced by working- and middle-class whites.



Zach D Roberts/NurPhoto via Getty Images White supremacists take part in a "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017.

In November 2016, Trump defeated former secretary of state Hillary Clinton (D) by more than 70 votes in the Electoral College (though he lost the popular vote by nearly 3 million). In January 2017, he took office, and his administration was subject to accusations of racism for the next four years. In August 2017, white supremacist groups descended on Charlottesville, Virginia, to protest the planned removal of a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee. A protester drove his car into a crowd of counterprotesters, killing one woman. In the aftermath, President Trump (R, 2017–2021) issued a statement condemning the "egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence, on many sides." When questioned about the "on many sides" aspect of the statement, the White House issued another statement declaring, "Racism is evil," but at a press conference several days later Trump asserted there were "very fine people, on both sides" of the protests. He also criticized calls to remove Confederate statues and later in his administration opposed moves to rename military bases named after Confederate generals. [See [Confederate Monuments](#)]

President Trump again faced accusations of racism in January 2018 after the *Washington Post* reported that during an immigration policy meeting at the White House, he had asked why the United States accepted so many immigrants from "shithole countries," like Haiti and nations in Africa, which are predominantly Black, instead of nations like Norway, which is predominantly white. The president also frequently portrayed American cities with majority-Black populations as dens of crime and misery in a way that some Black community leaders argued was reductive and racist. He frequently suggested, for example, that the federal government might have to send in forces to tamp down on "carnage" in Chicago, which had experienced spikes in gang-related gun violence in poor Black neighborhoods. In July 2019, he referred to Baltimore in a tweet as a "rat and rodent infested mess" where "no human being would want to live." Though Trump faced criticism for such comments, others asserted that well-meaning policy makers must be able to talk about the rising and staggering levels of gun violence and poverty in Black urban communities without being dismissed as racists.



Scott Olson/Getty Images Residents and activists carry crosses bearing the names of people killed by gun violence walk down Michigan Avenue in Chicago, Illinois, in December 2016.

Conversations surrounding race and racism in the United States exploded in the spring and summer of 2020 after the killing of George Floyd, a Minneapolis, Minnesota, Black man who died after a white police officer knelt on him for more than nine minutes while Floyd was handcuffed and protesting he could not breathe. Floyd's death sparked massive protests and riots across the country, even though many states had entered lockdowns in an attempt to control the spread of the coronavirus, a potentially fatal and highly contagious virus that had already disproportionately affected Black Americans since it first hit the country in early 2020. Some protesters—arguing that Black communities might be safer if local governments largely replaced law enforcement with better funded social services, mental health treatment, and education programs—embraced the slogan "Defund the Police."

The demonstrations seemed to garner widespread backing. Civiqs, a research firm, reported in June 2020 that support for Black Lives Matter climbed in the first two weeks of protests as much as it had over the previous two years, leading to a historic high percentage of Americans—55 percent—supporting the movement. Democrats in Congress embraced sweeping policing reform, which they codified in the Justice in Policing Act, though the pageantry surrounding legislators' support for the protests—in which Democratic lawmakers knelt in a moment of silence for Floyd while wearing Kente cloths, traditional African textiles—attracted some mockery for being performative and appropriative of Black culture.



BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP via Getty Images Democratic lawmakers observe a moment of silence on Capitol Hill for George Floyd and other victims of police brutality on June 8, 2020.

Many companies and institutions, meanwhile, issued statements pledging to take steps to combat racism and promote diversity. Google CEO Sundar Pichai, for example, announced "a new, multi-series training for Googlers of all levels that explores systemic racism and racial consciousness." Sportswear company Adidas pledged to fill at least 30 percent of open positions with Black or Latino employees, and the National Association for Stock Car Racing, a sporting organization particularly popular in the South, banned Confederate flags from its races. Many businesses closed for Juneteenth, an unofficial holiday commemorating June 19, 1865, when enslaved Americans in Texas learned of the end of slavery. Institutions ranging from the New York City Metropolitan Museum of Art to the *Los Angeles Times* issued public statements apologizing for what they asserted were their historical roles in perpetuating racism and pledging their commitment to racial justice. [See [Google Commits to Anti-Racism Initiatives](#) (primary source)]

This outpouring of pledges encountered both acclaim and ridicule. Anti-racist activists questioned whether these commitments would truly last, while skeptics of the anti-racist movement painted mea culpas of white supremacy from relatively liberal institutions as absurd. Many observers took note of a shift in how racism and white supremacy were being defined. "Ten years ago, white supremacy frequently described the likes of the Ku Klux Klan and David Duke, the neo-Nazi politician from Louisiana," *New York Times* reporter Michael Powell wrote in October 2020. "Now it cuts a swath through the culture, describing an array of subjects: the mortgage lending policies of banks; a university's reliance on SAT scores as a factor for admissions decisions; programs that teach poor people better nutrition; and a police department's enforcement policies."

Others, meanwhile, questioned whether, as many protesters alleged, widespread racism among law enforcement officers was truly driving what many saw as the reckless use of force against African Americans. Poverty and higher crime rates in Black neighborhoods, they pointed out, simply led to more encounters with police, increasing the chance that some of those encounters would end in violence. The recognition of this statistical discrepancy, some argued, better explained the disproportionate killing of Black men by law enforcement than assuming that racism was running rampant in police forces, many of which included officers of many races. Some, including McWhorter, pointed out that shootings of unarmed white men often mirrored the controversial high-profile killings of unarmed Black men but did not command nearly the media attention that those deaths did.

Displays of white penance, demands for conformity among protesters, and a sometime seeming refusal to wrestle with the potential consequences of truly "defunding the police" also disturbed some observers. Footage taken in several locations, including Minneapolis, showed white protesters kneeling and begging forgiveness from Black protesters for the country's legacy of racism and slavery. In Washington, D.C., footage of protesters surrounding diners and lambasting a woman who failed to raise her fist in solidarity with the marchers prompted concern that protests for racial justice had degraded into mere bullying. In Minneapolis, a city council member faced blowback after, when asked by a CNN journalist who she

should call if someone broke into her house if the city continued with plans to dismantle its police department, she responded by criticizing the question—which struck many as logical—as "coming from a place of privilege."

Though most protests across the country were peaceful, many cities experienced property damage, violence, and attacks on law enforcement officers to an extent that was, in the eyes of some critics, underreported by the media and too often excused by anti-racist activists. Those who sympathized with demonstrators argued that riots and looting were measures of last resort for a desperate and persecuted community. Many quoted King, who had once referred to rioting as "the language of the unheard." King had also argued, however, that turning to violence would ultimately hurt the cause of Black Americans by lending rhetorical artillery to right-wing opponents of civil rights.

Many Democrats expressed similar concern in the months preceding the 2020 presidential election. Violent unrest and calls to defund the police, they warned, would push white suburban voters to reelect President Trump. Some, however, faced accusations of racism for making this point. In May 2020, for example, David Shor, a data analyst at Civis Analytics, a private progressive firm, tweeted an academic study from 2017 that had found that race riots in the 1960s had contributed to Nixon's election in 1968. Shor faced a backlash from liberal activists on Twitter, one of whom accused him of minimizing "Black grief and rage," and was fired from his job days later. In another incident the following month, a Twitter user posted a picture of what he said was a San Diego Gas & Electric employee making the "OK" hand sign—which had recently been coopted by white supremacists as a hate symbol—outside his truck window. After the footage went viral, the man lost his job. The employee, who was Mexican American, said he had merely been cracking his knuckles. Also in June, a business law professor at the University of California at Los Angeles faced accusations of racism and was put on leave after declining to allow Black students to skip his final exam because of Floyd's death. These incidents and others led some to question whether institutions' desperation to appear in-step with the crusade for racial justice had come at the cost of fairness and common sense.

Changing Discourse Surrounding Racism Prompts Controversy

As issues of race repeatedly made national headlines in the first two decades of the 21st century, academics and activists were wrestling with how to talk about race and putting new emphasis on the role race and racism has played in U.S. history. A series of books—including *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2017) by writer Reni Eddo-Lodge, *How to Be Less Stupid About Race: On Racism, White Supremacy, and the Racial Divide* (2018) by sociologist Crystal Fleming, and *So You Want to Talk About Race* (2018) by writer Ijeoma Oluo—sold millions of copies in the United States.

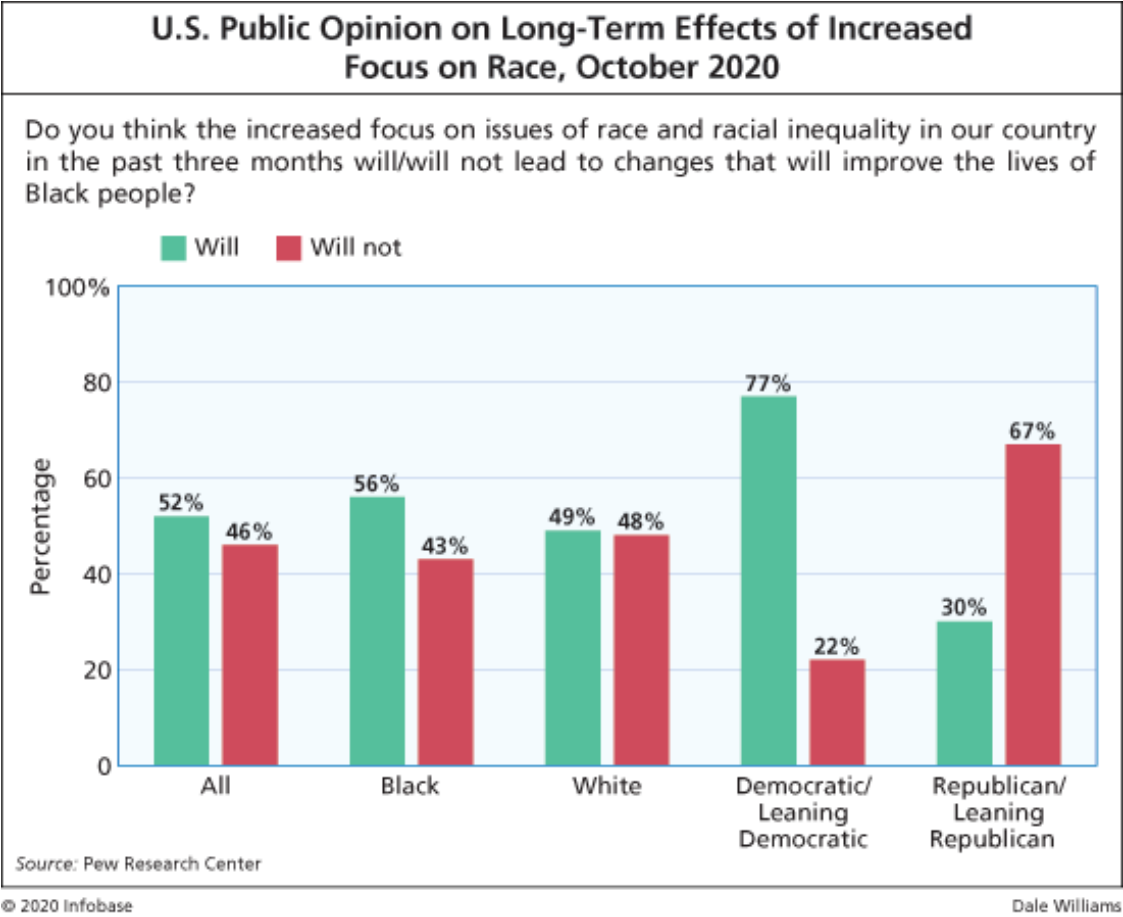
Among the most prominent contributors to the discussion about race and racism in the United States was journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates. In 2014, Coates, who is Black, published "The Case for Reparations," a widely discussed *Atlantic* article that detailed how slavery and the decades of discrimination and segregation that followed had a lasting impact on Black Americans' ability to build wealth and take advantage of educational, career, and political opportunities. The following year, he published *Between the World and Me*, a memoir and analysis of growing up Black in the United States, and in 2017 came out with *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*, a collection of essays, the title of which referred to the period of Reconstruction, not to the Obama administration, as some assumed. [See [Slavery Reparations](#)]

Throughout his works, Coates stressed the role race and racism played in African-American life, at times suggesting that anti-Black discrimination might well be a permanent feature of American society. "White supremacy was so foundational to this country," he wrote in *We Were Eight Years in Power*, "that it would not be defeated in my lifetime, my child's lifetime, or perhaps ever."

Also influential—and controversial—has been the work of Robin DiAngelo, a scholar of "whiteness studies" who has worked for two decades as a diversity consultant for corporations and other groups, including Democratic members of Congress. In 2018, DiAngelo published *White Fragility*, a book that became a bestseller in 2020 in the wake of George Floyd's death. In *White Fragility*, DiAngelo, who is white, asserted that all white people are racist, "guilty of perpetrating immeasurable harm," and culpable of using "the subjugation of others" for their own gain. The "fragility" the book's title references is what DiAngelo argued is the tendency of white people to react with denial, anger, and defensiveness when confronted with their own white privilege and internalized biases. "The mere suggestion that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses," she wrote. "These include emotions such as anger, fear, guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation. These responses work to reinstate white equilibrium...and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy." DiAngelo cast particular blame on white progressives, who, she charged, by believing they are not racist, "cause the most daily damage to people of color."

Following *White Fragility* was the publication of one of the most prominent texts of the anti-racist movement—*How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi. In the book, Kendi argued that aggressive anti-racism is essential to uprooting prejudice in the United States, which he likened to a kind of cancer. Racism, he wrote, is born not only of ignorance and hate but also of the willful blindness and self-interest of white Americans in preserving their privileged position in society.

In Kendi's view, policies that perpetuate disparities between racial groups are by definition racist, whereas policies that promote equality between racial groups are anti-racist. A perfect anti-racist world, he wrote in *How to Be an Antiracist*, would be one in which "equal opportunities and thus outcomes exist between" racial groups. "The most threatening racist movement is not the alt-right's [a loose coalition of often anti-government, misogynist, and white supremacist groups] unlikely drive for a White ethnostate but the regular American's drive for a 'race-neutral' one," he wrote. "[T]here's no such thing as a 'not racist.' There is only racist and antiracist."



Kendi rejected the terms *institutional racism*, *structural racism*, and *systemic racism* as too vague, claiming that because "[e]very policy in every institution in every community in every nation is producing or sustaining either racial inequity or equity between racial groups," every policy is itself either "racist" or "antiracist." *Vox* co-founder Ezra Klein pressed Kendi on this assertion in a 2019 interview, asking whether, for example, reducing capital gains taxes (taxes levied on various investments)—a policy that most casual observers would not necessarily connect with race—would be considered racist because fewer Black Americans invest in the stock market; Kendi replied in the affirmative.

Coates, Kendi, and other writers have also rejected the argument that Black culture or Black conduct is partly to blame for racial disparities. Some, including several high-profile Black intellectuals, have contended that if Black Americans wish to reduce disparities between themselves and white Americans they will have to do so themselves by, for example, reducing the rate of single motherhood in poor Black communities, driving down crime rates, and placing greater cultural emphasis on educational achievement. In an article for the Manhattan Institute, a think tank, in 2019, Brown University economist Glenn Loury, who is Black, contrasted this reasoning, which he referred to as the "development narrative," with what he called the "bias narrative." This bias narrative, he explained, blames outside forces for problems within the Black community by insisting that the country "need[s] to have a 'conversation' about race," that "white America must reform itself," and that "racism must end."

One of the most famous—and controversial—statements in support of the development narrative was a provocative NAACP address given by comedian Bill Cosby (who served more than two years in prison for sexual assault before his conviction was overturned in 2021) in 2004. "[T]hey opened the doors, they gave us the right, and today, ladies and gentlemen, in our cities and public schools we have [a] fifty percent drop out [rate]," he said. "In our own neighborhood, we have men in prison. No longer is a person embarrassed because they're pregnant without a husband. No longer is a boy considered an embarrassment if he tries to run away from being the father of the unmarried child."

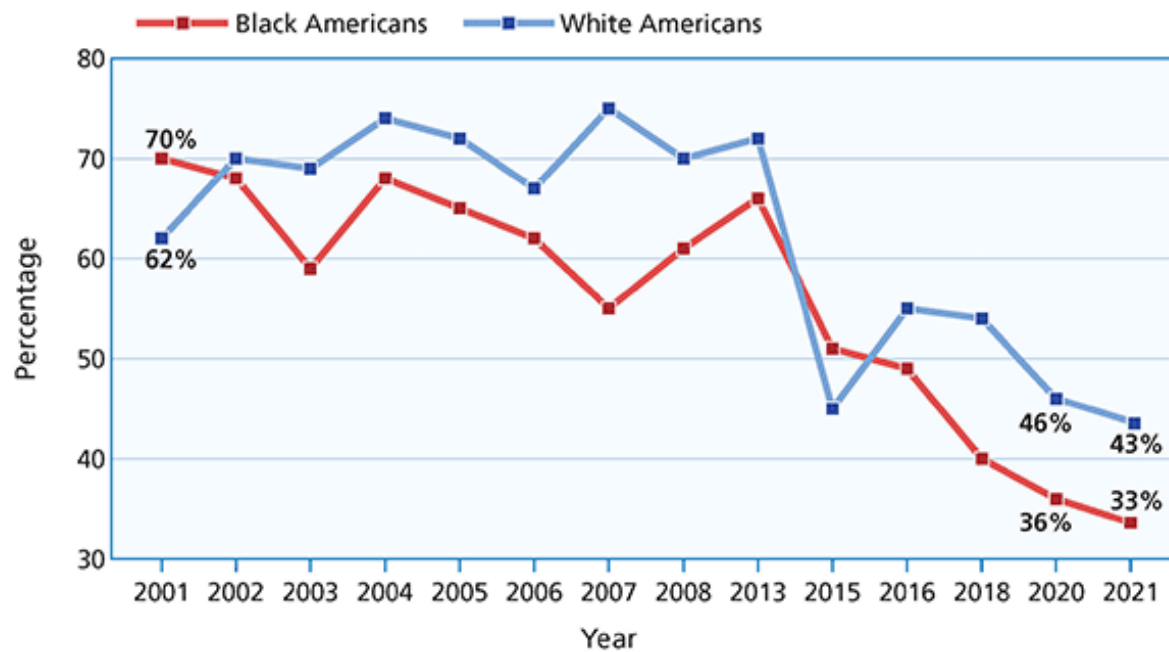
Coates analyzed this address and similar arguments in *We Were Eight Years in Power*. Cosby's culturally conservative interpretation of the challenges facing the Black community, Coates wrote, appealed to Black and whites alike because it had the "lure of the simplistic" and touched on "a rage that lives in all African Americans, a collective feeling of disgrace that borders on self-hatred." Coates, however, ultimately rejected such reasoning. "[T]here's nothing wrong with Black people," he told *The Root* in 2014, "that the complete and total elimination of white supremacy would not fix." Kendi, similarly, disavowed what he described in *How to Be an Antiracist* as his parents' view that Black people in poor communities "should focus on pulling themselves up by their baggy jeans and tight halter tops, getting off crack, street corners, and government 'handouts.'" The consequences of drug use, gang violence, and single motherhood, he argued, were frequently exaggerated in comparison to the systemic racism that was the true culprit of racial inequality. Kendi termed anyone "who is expressing the racist idea that a racial group is culturally or behaviorally inferior" an "assimilationist," whereas an anti-racist expresses "the idea that racial groups are equals and none needs developing."

Other Black intellectuals, like Loury, have argued that confronting both systemic racism and problems within the Black community is necessary to reduce racial disparities. Though "it is dangerous to talk about 'Black culture' as if it were only one thing," Loury wrote for the Manhattan Institute, the "most sensible position" to eliminating racial inequalities was "to chart a middle course—acknowledging antiblack biases that should be remedied while insisting on addressing and reversing the patterns of behavior that impede black people from seizing newly opened opportunities to prosper."

Also informing these debates over race and racism in the United States has been the widening influence of critical race theory, a framework first articulated in the mid-1970s by academic scholars concerned with what they saw as the slow progress of the civil rights movement. Critical race theory emphasizes how racial prejudice affects institutions, law, politics, and the overall distribution of opportunity and power in society. "Racism," Black studies scholar Omowale Akintunde wrote in 1999, "is a systemic, societal, institutional, omnipresent, and epistemologically embedded phenomenon that pervades every vestige of our reality." Critical race scholars, like anti-racist activists, often argue that naming and shaming systemic racism where it occurs is essential to its eventual dismantlement.

U.S. Public Opinion on Race Relations, 2001–2021

Percentage of Americans who say relations between Blacks and whites are somewhat or very good....



Source: Gallup

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The development of critical race theory also contributed to the popularization of several other commonly used—and controversial—concepts, including those of implicit biases (internalized or unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that can affect people's behavior toward members of minority groups); microaggressions (statements or actions that subtly or indirectly discriminate against members of a marginalized group); and white privilege.

Since their premiere in academia in the late 20th century, concepts of implicit bias, microaggressions, and white privilege have been making their way into public discourse and the workplace. These propositions, however, are by no means universally accepted. Low-income or otherwise disadvantaged white people often scoff at the notion that they benefit from privilege, and scientific research into the extent to which implicit bias in regard to race actually affects behavior and decision-making has yielded mixed results. Others dismiss much of this rhetoric as oversensitive "wokeness," or alertness to injustice, particularly racial injustice, in society.

Nevertheless, many employers, universities, and other institutions have embraced these concepts by placing value on diversity in the workforce, holding seminars on racism, and requiring employees to go through implicit bias training. "As the thinking goes...nonconscious prejudices and stereotypes are spontaneously and automatically activated and may inadvertently affect how white Americans see and treat Black people and other people of color," Tiffany Green, a health economist at the University of Wisconsin, and Nao Hagiwara, a psychology professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, wrote in *Scientific American* in 2020. "The hope is that, with proper training, people can learn to recognize and correct this damaging form of bias."

Evidence that implicit bias training affects human behavior, however, is scarce. "[T]o date, none of these interventions has been shown to result in permanent, long-term reductions of implicit bias scores or, more importantly, sustained and meaningful changes in behavior," Green and Hagiwara wrote. "Even worse, there is consistent evidence that bias training done the 'wrong way' (think lukewarm diversity training) can actually have the opposite impact, inducing anger and frustration among white employees."

Other institutions hired diversity and inclusion specialists to root out unaddressed instances of racism or discrimination. Some such campaigns have spurred ridicule from skeptics of the anti-racist movement. In July 2020, for example, the neighborhood association of Phinney, an upscale community in Seattle, Washington, that had recently launched an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion initiative, voted to end a neighborhood custom of decorating the community with "holiday monkeys" in a reference to a nearby zoo. The community, the association found, had not "properly take[n] into account the extended history of monkeys being used as a racist symbol, with Black people being derogatorily referred to as

monkeys symbolically and in language." The neighborhood association also removed one of two water fountains in its civic center because the presence of two water fountains had "presented to some community members as a legacy or symbol of segregation and caused discomfort and pain." (In the Jim Crow South, Black and white people often had to use separate water fountains.)

The changes prompted some mockery. A much more meaningful gesture, critics argued, would have been for the neighborhood to change its zoning laws to allow more affordable housing. Studies have suggested that residing in a mixed-income community is one of the most effective ways of improving one's chance at social mobility, yet residential neighborhoods in many metropolitan and suburban areas are often segregated by income, which in many cases also means largely segregated by race.

Despite continuing disagreement over anti-racism initiatives, polling suggested that a growing number of Americans believed the country still had a problem with racism. A June 2020 Monmouth University poll found that 71 percent of white Americans viewed racial discrimination as a big problem in the United States—a rise of 26 percentage points from 2015. "White people are swapping online guides to curbing racism and joining a growing network of explicitly white racial justice groups," journalist David Scharfenberg wrote in the *Boston Globe* that month. "And white-led companies and organizations are flooding diversity trainers with requests for workshops and strategic guidance."

Even white participation in the anti-racist movement, however, generated internal strife on the left. Though some Black intellectuals and anti-racists have long contested that the responsibility for dismantling racism should lie primarily with white people, other activists have expressed resentment that anti-racist causes garner more attention by virtue of white support, and they express concern that white allies will drown out Black voices in the movement. "One major critique that people of color have had when some white people enter into spaces," Kendi told the *Boston Globe* in 2020, "they seek to basically take over, and take up space, and take up the oxygen, and create a scenario in which everything is revolving around them."

Backlash to Anti-Racism, Critical Race Theory, and DEI Stir Education Wars

During the administration of President Trump, the increasing use of anti-racist and implicit bias trainings sparked a backlash from the federal government. In August 2020, for example, the U.S. Department of Justice sent a letter to Seattle officials alleging that training the city had conducted to address "internalized racial superiority" among its white employees and "internalized racial inferiority" among its employees of color possibly violated Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits employee discrimination on the basis of race. The Trump administration, Russell Vought, director of the Office of Management and Budget, wrote in the memo, had learned that "employees across the Executive Branch have been required to attend trainings in which they are told that 'virtually all White people contribute to racism' or they are required to admit that they 'benefit from racism.'" The government, he wrote, "cannot accept our employees receiving training that seeks to undercut our core values as Americans and drive division within our workforce."

In September 2020, the Trump administration issued a memo ordering an end to such trainings—which it deemed "divisive, anti-American propaganda"—in federal agencies. President Trump defended the decision to end such trainings at a presidential debate later that month. "I ended it because it's racist," he said. "I ended it because a lot of people were complaining that they were asked to do things that were absolutely insane, that it was a radical revolution within our military, in our schools, all over the place."

Weeks earlier, President Trump had also taken issue with the 1619 Project, a popular, acclaimed, and ultimately controversial series of *New York Times* articles and podcasts named for the first year enslaved Africans arrived in an English colony in what would later become the United States. The project had received wide praise for emphasizing, in a way many traditional histories of the country had not, the long shadow slavery and the subjugation of Black Americans cast on the nation's development. The series also, however, stirred criticism from historians for what they argued was a distortion of the facts. In particular, several prominent scholars objected to the project's claim that the American Revolution had been fought in large part to protect the institution of slavery, an assertion for which they contended there was little or no evidence. Some historians also lambasted the project's claim that Black Americans have "for the most part...fought alone" in the fight for freedom and civil rights, pointing out that white allies had assisted in this struggle since the very beginning of the abolitionist movement.

Others criticized the 1619 Project for seeming to suggest that discrimination against Black people in the United States was somehow intrinsic, permanent, or insurmountable. "Anti-black racism," Nikole Hannah-Jones, who headed the project, wrote in August 2019, "runs in the very DNA of this country." Indeed, the controversy over the project seemed to encapsulate two very different ways of recounting U.S. history. "The clash between the *Times* authors and their historian critics represents a fundamental disagreement over the trajectory of American society," journalist Adam Serwer wrote in the *Atlantic* months later. "Was America founded as a slavocracy, and are current racial inequities the natural outgrowth of that? Or was America conceived in liberty, a nation haltingly redeeming itself through its founding principles?"

Despite the controversy, school districts in Buffalo, New York; Chicago, and elsewhere began to integrate course materials designed by the 1619 Project into their curricula, prompting a backlash from conservatives. In July 2020, for example, Senator Tom Cotton (R, Arkansas) proposed a bill to ban schools from using the project, which he claimed perpetrated the false notion that the United States was a "systemically racist country." In September 2020, similarly, President Trump criticized the 1619 Project at a White House Conference on American History at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. "Our children are instructed from propaganda tracts...that try to make students ashamed of their own history," he said. "This project rewrites American history to teach our children that we were founded on the principle of oppression, not freedom.... Nothing could be further from the truth." To combat this "left-wing indoctrination," Trump announced the creation of the 1776 Commission, which would "promote patriotic education" in American schools. [See [President Trump Criticizes Anti-Racist Curricula in Education](#) (primary source)]

The 1776 Commission's resulting report, released on Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 2021, emphasized portraying "America's story" not just as one of "oppression and victimhood" but also of "unprecedented achievement toward freedom, happiness, and fairness for all." The American Historical Association, the largest professional organization for historians in the United States, accused the commission of elevating "ignorance about the past to a civic virtue." After ousting President Trump and assuming office in January 2021, President Joe Biden (D) disbanded the commission and revoked Trump's executive order barring diversity training in federal agencies. Later that year, President Biden issued an executive order that created a new Advisory Commission on Advancing Education, Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Black Americans. "Because of persistent racial and systemic injustices in our Nation, Black students remain more likely to attend high-poverty and racially segregated schools than White students," the order stated. "It is the policy of my Administration to advance educational equity, excellence, and economic opportunity for Black Americans and communities from early childhood until their chosen career." [See [President Biden Creates Commission on Equity in Education for Black Americans](#) (primary source)]

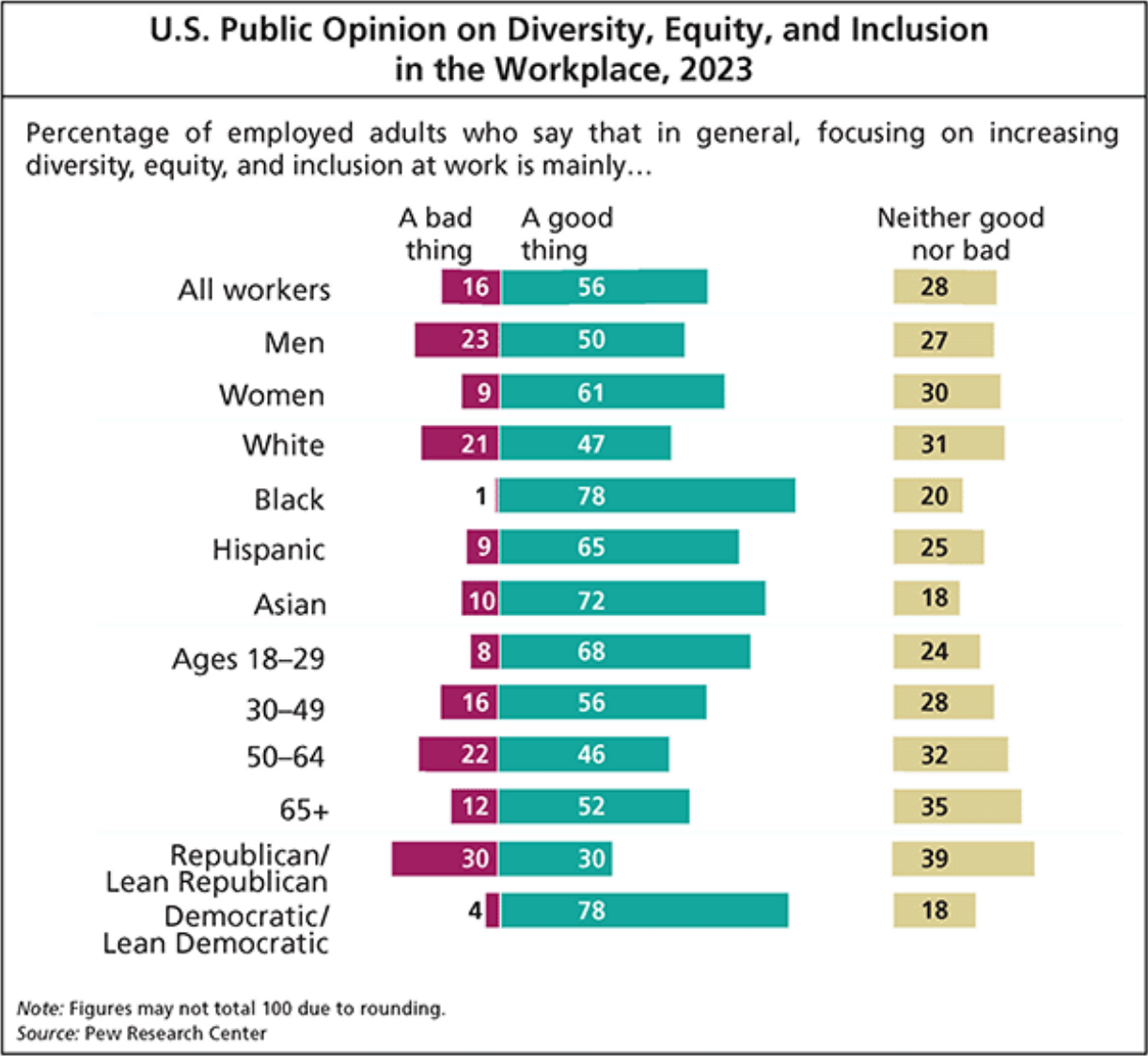
Controversies surrounding anti-racism continued to permeate education policy debates over the next few years. Conservative groups challenged schools over anti-racist initiatives or related classroom activities like, for example, separating students by race into discussion "affinity groups." Conservative activists like Christopher Rufo in particular targeted the teaching of critical race theory, though many denied that the ideology—generally an advanced subject reserved for higher education—was present in K–12 classrooms at all.

Parents' rights groups sprung up around the nation to voice concerns about what their students were learning in schools, and grassroots activism contributed to the passage in more than a dozen states of laws or executive orders restricting how public school curricula could address race. In March 2022, for example, Florida legislators passed the Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees, or Stop Woke, Act, prohibiting public schools and businesses from teaching students or workers they "must feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress because of actions, in which the individual played no part, committed in the past by other members of the same race, color, sex, or national origin." The same month, South Dakota legislators barred teachers from propagating "divisive concepts," such as that any individual was inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive by virtue of their race, color, religion, sex, ethnicity, or national origin, or that meritocracy "or traits such as a strong work ethic are racist or sexist or were created by members of a particular race or sex to oppress members of another race or sex." Parents challenged classroom and library materials under these laws and similar statutes. PEN America, a group that advocates for free speech in literature, reported in September 2023 that efforts to ban books in the United States had increased 33 percent in the 2022–23 school year compared to the previous year. About one-third of the books challenged had contained content relating to race and racism.

Backlash to DEI initiatives, meanwhile, gained traction following a landmark U.S. Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action in June 2023. In [Students for Fair Admissions v. President & Fellows of Harvard College](#), the Court ruled 6–3 that race-based affirmative action admissions programs at Harvard College and the University of North Carolina violated the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees all people equal protection of the law. "Eliminating racial discrimination means eliminating all of it," Chief Justice John G. Roberts wrote in the decision. Vague goals like promoting diversity on campus, he held, "were not sufficiently coherent" enough to justify perpetrating racial

classifications, particularly when such programs had no clear or "logical end point." [See [Students for Fair Admissions v. President & Fellows of Harvard College, U.S. Supreme Court Decision](#) (primary source)]

Though the decision affected only admissions programs at colleges and universities, it gave fuel to lawsuits challenging affirmative action and diversity efforts in government and businesses. The month after the ruling, 13 Republican state attorneys general wrote an open letter to executives at the nation's biggest companies urging them to reconsider DEI programs in light of the Supreme Court's ruling. "We, the undersigned Attorneys General of 13 States, write to remind you of your obligations as an employer under federal and state law to refrain from discriminating on the basis of race, whether under the label of 'diversity, equity, and inclusion' or otherwise," they wrote. "Treating people differently because of the color of their skin, even for benign purposes, is unlawful and wrong. Companies that engage in racial discrimination should and will face serious legal consequences." [See [Republican Attorneys General Urge CEOs to Abandon DEI Initiatives](#) (primary source)]



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Legal challenges have already dismantled DEI and affirmative action initiatives in the corporate world. In August 2023, American Alliance for Equal Rights, a conservative legal group run by anti-affirmative action activist Edward Blum, sued the Fearless Fund, a venture capital firm that prioritized investing in businesses run by women of color, over a grant program that was open only to Black women. In September, a federal appeals court in Georgia ordered the company to halt the program, which Blum had charged perpetrated "explicit racial exclusion" in violation of federal civil rights law. The group also sued two law firms that sponsored fellowships open only to students of color, students with disabilities, and students in the LGBTQ community. In response to the suit, both firms made their fellowships available to all students.

Another notable blow to the anti-racist movement was Boston University's decision in September 2023 to dramatically slash the budget and staff of its Center for Antiracist Research after reports emerged that the center had mismanaged a sizeable budget with little scholarship to show for it. Boston University had recruited Kendi, who originally founded a similar center at American University in 2017, to move to its campus amid the racial reckoning of 2020. Some saw the

collapse as indicative of the lack of intellectual rigor in the movement in general, while others pointed out that concerted conservative opposition had helped sidetrack many anti-racist initiatives. "The reorganization is partly a sign of the times," journalist Stephanie Saul wrote in the *New York Times* in September 2023. "Enthusiasm for funding racial justice causes has diminished as Mr. Floyd's murder has faded out of the media spotlight and conservatives direct their ire toward efforts to diversify companies and institutions and to teach race in schools."

Indeed, in the years since many corporations voiced their commitments to diversity in 2020, several prominent companies, including Google and Meta (the entity that owns Facebook), have chosen to dismantle or wind down DEI programs, and studies have shown that executives rank DEI as less important than they did closer to the uproar following Floyd's death. In November 2023, Paradigm, a consulting firm, reported that, on average, large companies had cut DEI spending from the previous year and a smaller percentage had a DEI strategy. "[H]undreds of companies have been re-examining [DEI] initiatives after a series of challenges to diversity programs," *New York Times* journalist Emma Goldberg wrote in January 2024. "Some have explored moving away from initiatives that attract a lot of public attention, like mandatory anti-bias trainings, and instead focusing on lower-profile D.E.I. strategies." As conservatives continue to target critical race theory, DEI, and anti-racism in general, it is unlikely such issues will disappear from the political arena anytime soon.

Supporters Argue

The Anti-Racist Movement Will Help Reduce Racial Inequities in the United States

Supporters of the anti-racist movement argue that disparities between Black and white Americans stem from—pure and simple—the legacy and persistence of anti-Black racism. As a result, they contend, only a tenacious and pervasive effort to call out and fight racism where it occurs will yield racial justice. "Racial discrimination is the sole cause of racial disparities in this country and in the world at large," Ibram X. Kendi wrote in *Stamped from the Beginning* in 2016. "Black Americans' history of oppression has made Black opportunities—not Black people—inferior."

Unless one is actively and explicitly challenging racism and racist policies, anti-racists assert, one is culpable in the perpetuation of a racist system. "[J]ust as citizens of capitalistic societies reinforce capitalism, whether they identify as capitalist or not, and whether they want to or not," Steven Roberts, director of the Social Concepts Lab in the psychology department at Stanford University, and Michael Rizzo, a postdoctoral fellow at New York University, wrote in *American Psychologist*, an academic journal, in 2020, "citizens of racist societies reinforce racism, whether they identify as racist or not, and whether they want to or not."

Critics of the anti-racist movement often insist on defining racism in extremely narrow terms as words or actions explicitly intended to hurt Black Americans and other people of color, advocates contend, when, in reality, racism is much broader, subtler, and more insidious than that. It is the responsibility of all white Americans, they argue, to recognize the indirect manifestations of racism and work to uproot them. "We have to stop thinking about racism simply as someone who says the N-word," *White Fragility* author Robin DiAngelo told the *Guardian* in 2019. "Racism is a white problem. It was constructed and created by white people and the ultimate responsibility lies with white people. For too long we've looked at it as if it were someone else's problem, as if it was created in a vacuum."

Indeed, anti-racists maintain, racism infiltrates nearly all aspects of American power structures, institutions, and societal norms. "People often define racism as disliking or mistreating others on the basis of race," Roberts wrote in a press release in 2020. "That definition is wrong. Racism is a system of advantage based on race. It is a hierarchy. It is a pandemic. Racism is so deeply embedded within U.S. minds and U.S. society that it is virtually impossible to escape."

Full recognition of the violence, terror, and dehumanization racism has exerted repeatedly throughout U.S. history, proponents of anti-racism argue, is essential to reversing racial injustice. "Over and over, Black people have asserted the simple but radical truth of their own humanity and worthiness, and over and over, America has not fully heard them," journalist Erin Aubry Kaplan wrote in the *New York Times* in 2020. "African-Americans kept up the messaging because they've had to—they've always known it's Step 1 in our national process of racism recovery, and as anyone in a 12-step program can attest, you can't make real progress with the higher steps until you get the first one right."

Throughout U.S. history, proponents of anti-racism assert, advances in civil rights have inevitably triggered a backlash of resentment from white Americans. These counterattacks, they insist, have helped breed a systemic racism that still has concrete and enduring consequences for Black Americans today. "White rage is not about visible violence, but rather it

works its way through the courts, the legislatures, and a range of government bureaucracies," historian Carol Anderson wrote in *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* in 2016. "White rage doesn't have to wear sheets, burn crosses, or take to the streets. Working the halls of power, it can achieve its ends far more effectively, far more destructively. The trigger for white rage, inevitably, is black advancement."

The idea that Black culture or the shortcomings of Black people and Black communities is somehow to blame for racial disparities in the United States, anti-racism supporters contend, is a myth designed to divert culpability from white Americans and U.S. institutions. "[W]hite rage manages to maintain not only the upper hand but also, apparently, the moral high ground," Anderson wrote.

It's...chastising black people to fix the problems in their own neighborhoods instead of always scapegoating the police. It's the endless narratives about a culture of black poverty that devalues education, hard work, family, and ambition. It's a mantra told so often that some African Americans themselves have come to believe it. Few even think anymore to question the stories, the "studies" of black fathers abandoning their children, of rampant drug use in black neighborhoods, of African American children hating education because school is "acting white"—all of which have been disproved but remain foundational in American lore.

Advocates of the anti-racism movement argue that diversity, implicit bias, and racial sensitivity trainings are not, as some conservatives have claimed, somehow un-American or anti-American. "Racial-equity work focuses on undoing systemic racism in organizations, institutions and governments," Glenn Harris and Julie Nelson, president and senior vice president, respectively, of Race Forward, a nonprofit group devoted to racial justice, wrote in the *Seattle Times* in 2020. "Racial equity work is quintessentially American, the product of communities coming together to devise innovative solutions to long-standing problems for and by the people."

Confronting the role racism still plays in the United States will be troublesome, difficult, and exhausting, anti-racists concede, but it is still necessary. "Racism is a form of convenience, in the sense that it's designed to make life easier for its beneficiaries," Kaplan wrote.

So is white privilege—the phenomenon of not having to think about the costs of oppression, or about Black people at all. Antiracism requires the opposite: engagement.... Being truly antiracist will require white people to be inconvenienced by new policies and practices, legal and social, that affect everything in everyone's daily lives, from jobs to arts and publishing.

Indeed, white Americans must be able to make real sacrifices and engage in rigorous self-introspection, anti-racists contend, to bring about racial justice. "Our narrow focus on explicit racists misses a development that explains our current moment: that much of our struggle with race today is bound up in the false innocence of white suburban bliss and the manic effort to protect it, no matter the costs," Eddie Glaude Jr., a professor of African-American studies at Princeton University, wrote in *Time* in 2018. "We must, once and for all, confront the silent majority—even if until now we did not realize we are them. We must confront ourselves."

The fact that explicit white supremacy is now relatively rare in U.S. society, anti-racists assert, by no means frees Black Americans from the residual effects that deep-seated racism still has on their daily lives. Systemic racism "is *not* 'systems full of racists,'" *Washington Post* columnist Megan McArdle wrote in 2020. "Black people aren't dying in such numbers because all or even most white people around them hate them and want bad things to happen to them. But they probably are dying because we enslaved their ancestors."

Supporters of anti-racism argue that subtle forms of prejudice and bigotry, even unintended, continue to deprive Black Americans of the economic and social mobility enjoyed by white Americans. "Well-designed studies show that discrimination against various signifiers of 'blackness' persist in our labor markets," McArdle wrote. "Note that this could happen *even if the people making discriminatory decisions have no particular animus toward black people*. All it takes is a slight preference for people whom they perceive to be 'like me.'"

The steady accretion and accumulation of these small, unconscious daily acts of bias, proponents of anti-racism contend, have a vast and extensive impact on Black Americans. "The way small decisions cascade into major social forces is how Americans who profess no racial hatred—and declare their implacable hatred for racism in all forms—could nonetheless end up contributing to patterns of residential, educational and employment segregation that left the average black American with fewer opportunities for well-paid office work than the average white person," McArdle wrote. "[I]f you

believe in the ideals of the American founding...in the American Dream...then you should believe that we must keep working at this problem until we've finally kicked it."

Racial bias has consequences in nearly every sphere of an individual's life, advocates of anti-racism contend. "The facts of our daily lives in this country speak volumes," Glaude wrote.

Studies reveal the racial bias in policing; in sentencing and rates of incarceration; in differential punishment in schools for black and brown children; in the persistence of residential segregation and its cascading effect in the life cycle of black people; in how even if an African-American or Hispanic adult earns a college degree, she will still financially lag behind a white American with the same degree.

Comparing, as opponents of the anti-racist movement often do, the striking economic mobility of Black immigrant groups to the relative lack of economic success among native-born Black Americans, anti-racists argue, is illogical and unfair. Any immigrant group is almost by definition more entrepreneurial and hard-working than the general population, they note, and the argument fails to highlight discrepancies between Black immigrants and non-Black immigrants. "[N]umerous commentators wondered why Black immigrants do so much better than Blacks born in America," Kendi wrote in *How to Be an Antiracist*.

Despite studies showing Black immigrants are, on average, the most educated group of immigrants in the United States, they earn lower wages than similarly trained non-Black immigrants and have the highest unemployment rate of any immigrant group. An ethnic racist asks, Why are Black immigrants doing better than African Americans? An ethnic antiracist asks, Why are Black immigrants not doing as well as other immigrant groups?

Advocating the embrace of a color-blind world in which race no longer matters, supporters of anti-racism contend, is naive and callous to the effects anti-Black discrimination continues to have in the United States. "Singular-race makers push for the end of categorizing and identifying by race," Kendi wrote in *How to Be an Antiracist*. "[T]he unfortunate truth is that their well-meaning post-racial strategy makes no sense in our racist world. Race is a mirage but one that humanity has organized itself around in very real ways. Imagining away the existence of races in a racist world is as conserving and harmful as imagining away classes in a capitalistic world—it allows the ruling races and classes to keep on ruling."

The charge that DEI attempts to advance people of color regardless of merit or qualifications, proponents assert, is a misunderstanding of what such initiatives represent. DEI "is not about achieving identical outcomes for all, but for creating a level playing field so everyone has a fair chance to succeed," Jarvis Sam, head of Rainbow Disruption, a DEI firm, told CBS News in January 2024. "[H]istorically, talent from some backgrounds and experiences aren't given a fair shake to apply and engage in the competitive process for opportunities. With good DEI, we are not trying to control outcome. We never stated that having diversity criteria means we will, or have to land a talent that comes from a specific demographic background."

It is easy for white people in power to dismiss anti-racism, supporters argue, because they do not experience or live with the daily consequences of it. Instead, they contend, all Americans should embrace policies that make Americans of color feel more welcome in institutions of power from universities to corporations to government. "Structural racism is an abstract concept unless you or your family are burdened, exhausted, demoralized or harmed by it," Wendy Barrington, director of the Center for Anti-Racism and Community Health in Seattle, Washington, wrote in the *Seattle Times* in April 2022.

The policies, practices and norms of our systems and organizations synergize to uphold and reinforce whiteness, which produces hostile and inequitable environments—in our schools, our workplaces, our cities. ... Our leaders need to understand this threat and act, not only to promote equity in the environments they are charged to steward but also to rectify the impacts of past harms. This is anti-racist leadership.

Opponents Argue

The Anti-Racist Movement Will Not Help Reduce Racial Inequities in the United States

Opponents of the anti-racist movement argue that addressing racial inequities in the United States demands concrete policy changes and actions, not the performative demonstrations of wokeness, public shaming, and endless self-flagellation by white Americans that anti-racist activists demand. "One can be fervently dedicated to improving the lot of black Americans without a purse-lipped, prosecutorial culture dedicated more to virtue signaling than to changing other people's lives," John McWhorter wrote in the *Atlantic* in 2018.

Progressives can battle a War on Drugs that creates a black market that tempts too many poor black men into lives of crime. They can fight for free access to long-acting, reversible contraceptives for poor women and phonics-based reading instruction for kids from bookless homes. They can stand against Republican attempts to discourage the black vote via a sham concern for all-but-nonexistent voter fraud. The struggle must, and will, continue. But the black person essentially barred from the polls gains nothing from someone sagely attesting to their white privilege on Twitter and decrying that "no one wants to talk about race in this country" when America is nothing less than obsessed with race week in and week out.

Anti-racist activists, critics assert, have engaged in dangerously binary racial thinking in which "whiteness and wrongness have become interchangeable," writer Thomas Chatterton Williams, who was born to a Black father and white mother but who has rejected identifying himself under traditional racial categories, wrote in the *New York Times* in 2017. This view, Williams states, is not so different from how white supremacists treat race.

Both sides eagerly reduce people to abstract color categories, all the while feeding off of and legitimizing each other, while those of us searching for gray areas and common ground get devoured twice. It is a dangerous vision of life we should refuse no matter who is doing the conjuring.... [S]o long as we fetishize race, we ensure that we will never be rid of the hierarchies it imposes.

Indeed, opponents contend, the anti-racist movement engages in precisely the same unhelpful emphasis on racial categories that justified the persecution of Black Americans for much of U.S. history. A more successful anti-racism movement, they contend, would utilize color-blindness, not race-consciousness. "[R]ace-consciousness...does not reject the old rigid racial categories so much as it transforms them, sneaking them in through the back door," Coleman Hughes wrote for the Manhattan Institute in 2020. It would be better, Hughes wrote, to form

an anti-racism grounded in the idea that there is a single human race to which we all belong—and that all the ways of dividing us up, though they may be important to understand our present reality, should not be given moral weight. That is the principle that ultimately conquered slavery and Jim Crow—and it is the principle that ought to be revived today.

The anti-racist movement's expansive and imprecise definition of the word *racist*, some critics contend, has effectively rendered the term powerless. "Although individual racist attitudes have been in precipitous decline for half a century, the 'racist' epithet is as common as it ever was," essayist Samuel Kronen wrote in *Quillette* in 2020.

Expanding the concept to incorporate any inequality in outcome or undesirable policy is a category error with a potentially heavy cost.... [B]y waging a cultural war against an intangible and all-pervasive structural force, we fail to identify and shame specific acts of racism, and shroud legitimate claims in uncertainty, confusion, and doubt.

Racism in the United States is a fading phenomenon, opponents insist, a reality that anti-racists simply refuse to recognize. "Absent from the catechism of woke anti-racism religion is any acknowledgment of the facts" such as that "police shootings of blacks have become exceedingly rare," Michael Barone, a senior political analyst at the *Washington Examiner*, wrote in 2020. "Christianity asserts that original sin will always be with us, but racism in America has been in long-term deep decline."

The anti-racist movement's tendency to see racism and anti-Black discrimination at every turn, critics of anti-racism contend, yields absurd results. "The famed KIPP charter schools [a national college preparatory chain that operates in low-income communities] abandoned their longtime slogan of 'Work Hard, Be Nice' after KIPP's leadership decided that the decades-old slogan hinders efforts to 'dismantle systemic racism,'" Frederick Hess, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, a think tank, wrote in 2020.

This summer, the National Museum of African American History and Culture's website featured an educational resource which described traits like "individualism," "hard work," "objectivity," "progress,"

"politeness," "decision-making," and "delayed gratification" as hallmarks of "white culture." The superintendent of New York's East Harlem Scholars Academies [a group of charter schools operating in New York City] penned a back-to-school essay for Education Week which instructed "white teachers" to steer away from talking about the individual accomplishments of black Americans, because doing so would "unintentionally teach students that 'really good, really successful' Black folks are exempt from racist structures." These cartoonish dogmas are both insulting and insane.

Anti-racist works like Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*, opponents assert, paint white Americans with sweeping characterizations that, if applied to different groups, would quickly be recognized as racist. "If a similar book were written about any other racial group—Asian Insecurity, Black Hostility, Latinx Insensitivity, etc., not only would the book never become a bestseller, it would never be published," David Burke, head of Citizens Take Action, a nonprofit organization, wrote in *New Discourses* in 2020. "People would see the book for what it is—an absurd generalization that attributes negative qualities to an entire race of people—the very definition of racism."

Much of the anti-racist movement, critics insist, also engages in transparently circular and sloppy logic. "DiAngelo frames her theory of white fragility such that...any denial of her theory is interpreted as proof of its validity," Burke wrote. "DiAngelo leaves white readers with only two options. Either acknowledge your fragility, which proves DiAngelo's theory, or deny your fragility, which according to DiAngelo, also proves her theory.... If our legal system worked this way, no person accused of a crime would ever be acquitted because their denial would prove their guilt."

Anti-racism, opponents assert, too often engages in vague prescriptions for "conversation" and pointless demands for admissions of guilt from white Americans instead of directing its energy toward marshaling the support and resources needed for the real policy changes necessary to end racial injustice. "Ritual 'acknowledgment' of White Privilege is, ultimately, for white people to feel less guilty," McWhorter wrote in the *Daily Beast* in 2017. "Real people are having real problems, and educated white America has been taught that what we need from them is willfully incurious, self-flagellating piety, of a kind that has helped no group in human history."

Anti-racists like Ibram X. Kendi call for policies that will establish and enforce perfect racial equity, but this outcome, critics argue, is simply impossible without discriminating against competing groups in an equally immoral manner. Some minority groups, including Asian Americans and Jewish Americans, they note, often tend to outperform other students in schools and out-earn other Americans in the workplace. In the worldview of an anti-racist activist like Kendi, however, "[i]f a group is less successful on average, then it is the result of victimization," author Daniel Friedman wrote in *Quillette* in 2020, "and the group should be collectively promoted to rectify the inequity." Friedman added:

[I]t is hard to see these ideas as anything but extremely menacing to successful minority groups.... If antiracist policy distributes power, wealth, and success in proportions that mirror group representation, then successful minorities must be brought into equity with everyone else. That will require purges where they are overrepresented in prestigious institutions and professions, and quotas limiting their future success are necessary to achieve the antiracist vision.

To truly address racial disparities in the United States, opponents of the anti-racist movement contend, it is not only essential to see how system-wide problems—like the disproportionate prosecution of African Americans in the criminal justice system and the underfunding of schools in low-income Black neighborhoods—affect opportunity, but also to examine how the conduct of Black Americans themselves perpetuates racial inequities. "Many vocal advocates for racial equality have been loath to consider the possibility that problematic patterns of behavior [in the African-American community] could be an important factor contributing to our persisting disadvantaged status," African-American scholar Glenn Loury wrote for the Manhattan Institute, a think tank, in 2019. "I have long tried to chart a middle course—acknowledging antiblack biases that should be remedied while insisting on addressing and reversing the patterns of behavior that impede black people from seizing newly opened opportunities to prosper. I still see this as the most sensible position."

The sweeping opposition to cultural criticism that pervades the anti-racist movement, critics argue, will prolong, not dismantle, racial disparities. "If someone said that black kids should not be encouraged to work hard a hundred years ago, it was probably because they were racist," Hughes wrote. "If someone says the same thing today, it's almost certainly because they are 'anti-racist.' But any political program that insists that black people be held to a lower standard will never be able to bring black achievement up to those same rejected standards—and thus will struggle mightily to address racial disparity."

The success of Black immigrant groups, critics of the anti-racist movement assert, makes clear that anti-Black bias cannot possibly be the sole cause of wealth disparities between Black and white Americans. "People tout the racial wealth gap as, ipso facto, an indictment of the system—even while black Caribbean and African immigrants are starting businesses, penetrating the professions, and presenting themselves at Ivy League institutions in outsize numbers," Loury wrote. "[S]omething is dreadfully wrong when adverse patterns of behavior readily visible in the black American population go without being adequately discussed—to the point that anybody daring to mention them is labeled a racist."

Anti-racist ideologies like those put forth in *White Fragility*, opponents argue, unhelpfully encourage Black Americans to think of themselves as perpetual victims rather than as individuals with the agency and willpower to succeed regardless of how white Americans or the "system" treats them. "In 2020—as opposed to 1920—I neither need nor want anyone to muse on how whiteness privileges them over me," McWhorter wrote in the *Atlantic* in 2020. "I see no connection between DiAngelo's brand of reeducation and vigorous, constructive activism in the real world on issues of import to the Black community. And I cannot imagine that any Black readers could willingly submit themselves to DiAngelo's ideas while considering themselves adults of ordinary self-regard and strength."

The anti-racist movement is politically untenable, opponents assert. By vilifying white Americans, they argue, anti-racists will inevitably undermine support for the real economic and policy changes that could help lift underprivileged Americans everywhere. "The focus on race... keeps us from seeing the ways disadvantage is rooted in patterns of social class that affect people of all races, and which can be the basis of cross-racial political coalitions," Andrew Koppelman, a law professor at Northwestern University, wrote in *USA Today* in 2020. "The answer is not to purify our souls but to change the conditions on the ground, to free ourselves from our shameful legacy of racism by actually improving the lives of the worst off African Americans."

The concept of race, opponents of the anti-racist movement argue, is itself a social construct without real scientific basis, and only through its complete abandonment can the country move past racial injustice. "If we really want to repair what is wrong in our society, it is going to require... nothing less heroic than new ideas," Williams wrote. "Let us acknowledge [racial injustice], let us grieve about it when we need to, but above all let us earnestly search for and find ways to fix it. I can think of no better start than rejecting the very logic that created and perpetuates the injury in the first place."

The failure of Kendi's institute and the decline of blatantly counterproductive DEI programs and race-based political movements, critics charge, are fitting ends to what was, at its base, an irresponsible and wrongheaded money-making scheme. "Both Kendi's center and BLM [Black Lives Matter] followed a similar model: drum up rumors of racism, prescribe DEI, create an apparatus, lure in donors, get paid," Caroline Downey, an education reporter for *National Review*, wrote in the *Washington Examiner* in September 2023. "The racial grievance business welcomes little accountability—or accounting, for that matter."

True diversity, opponents argue, requires the open-mindedness to debate and discuss the complexities of economic and political forces in American society that the anti-racist movement will never countenance. "[M]ajor universities, corporations, nonprofit groups and influential donors thought buying into Kendi's strident, simplistic formula—that racism is the cause of all racial disparities and that anyone who disagrees is a racist—could eradicate racial strife and absolve them of any role they may have played in it," columnist Pamela Paul wrote in the *New York Times* in October 2023. "[T]his reductionist line of thinking runs squarely against the enlightened principles on which many of those institutions were founded—free inquiry, freedom of speech, a diversity of perspectives."

Conclusion

Conversations About Race to Continue

Americans are nearly evenly divided over whether the United States' recent reckonings with race will have an actual impact on disparities between Black and white Americans. A Pew Research Center survey released in October 2020 in the wake of the national unrest following George Floyd's death in the spring found that about 48 percent of Americans thought "the increased focus on issues of race and racial inequality in the country in the past three months" would lead to policy changes that would address racial inequality. In a Pew poll released in August 2022, nearly two-thirds of Black adults said that the increased focus on race and racism in the United States had not led to changes that have improved the lives of African Americans.

Those on both sides of the anti-racist debate, meanwhile, have argued that more integration—and thereby more interaction and hopefully, more empathy, between Black and white Americans—could spur progress in addressing racial inequities. Too many schools and neighborhoods, many have noted, are still effectively racially segregated, often in part due to higher housing costs in white-majority neighborhoods and local resistance to zoning laws that would allow more affordable multi-unit housing. "Many white Americans," Jennifer Chudy, a professor of political science at Wellesley College, told the New York Times in 2020, "have chosen places to live, places to send their children to school, places to vacation, jobs to pursue, in ways that allow them to avoid thinking about racial inequality." In 2019, the Public Religion Research Institute, a think tank, reported the results of a survey finding that more than one in five Americans "seldom or never" interacted with a person of a different race or ethnicity. Enacting policies that reduce this de facto segregation, many have contended, will help improve race relations in the United States.

Others have predicted that, as biracial and multiracial families become increasingly common, the idea of dividing people between neat categories of race will come to seem ever more antiquated. Regardless, the anti-racist movement, and backlash to it, will likely have long-lasting consequences on conversations surrounding race and racism in the United States.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Define racism. How does the traditional definition of racism differ from the idea of systemic racism? What definition of racism do you agree with and why?
- 2) Do you think the anti-racist movement will help reduce economic and other disparities between Black and white Americans? Explain your position.
- 3) How are recent debates surrounding the anti-racist movement similar to debates between Black civil rights leaders throughout U.S. history, like W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, and Martin Luther King Jr. and Stokely Carmichael? How are they different?
- 4) Do you think that white Americans enjoy privilege because of their race? Why or why not?
- 5) Do you think race-consciousness—recognizing and examining how race affects American society—or color-blindness—attempting to move past the concept of race altogether—are more likely to mitigate racial disparities in the United States? Explain your position.

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Keywords

For further information about the ongoing debate over anti-racism, search for the following words and terms in electronic databases and other publications:

Coleman Hughes
George Floyd
Ibram X. Kendi

John McWhorter
Racial injustice
Robin DiAngelo
White allies

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Contact Information

Information on how to contact organizations that either are mentioned in the discussion about anti-racism or can provide additional information on the subject is listed below:

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