
Reparations for black Americans: how an idea went from the fringes to the mainstream

By Matthew Knott
April 6, 2019

New York: Toward the end of the first season of *The West Wing*, deputy White House chief-of-staff Josh Lyman finds himself dealing with a crisis. It has emerged that one of President Jed Bartlett's nominees for a senior position in the Department of Justice has endorsed a book arguing for reparations for the descendants of African slaves.



Author Ta-Nehisi Coates.

The position is so controversial Lyman fears it could derail the nomination and damage Bartlett politically.

The storyline reflected longstanding conventional wisdom in the US: providing financial compensation to black Americans for past wrongs is a politically toxic idea. But in America today, reparations has moved from the fringes to the centre of political debate. In a dramatic break with the past, leading Democratic presidential candidates are talking about the idea.



Slaves on the James Hopkinson Plantation planting sweet potatoes, circa 1862, in South Carolina

“More public attention is being paid to the question of reparations than at any point since the end of slavery,” says William Darity, an expert in African American studies at Duke University.

At an event in New York last week, Beto O’Rourke said he would support a study examining reparations for communities hurt by slavery and segregation.

Elizabeth Warren has called for a “full blown” debate about reparations. Julian Castro, another candidate, recently said: “If under the constitution we compensate people because we take their property, why wouldn’t you compensate people who actually were property?” Darity says: “It is an unprecedented and important moment to have presidential candidates publicly supporting a form of reparations.

“It is a topic that had been *verboden* for so long.”

The conversation about reparations reflects a surge in energy within the progressive wing of the Democratic Party and the willingness to discuss big ideas like a Green New Deal, Medicare-for-All and scrapping the electoral college.



Large group of slaves standing in front of buildings on Smith's Plantation, Beaufort, South Carolina

It also reflects an awareness among the candidates that African Americans are an increasingly important voting block in the Democratic party. In order to secure the presidential nomination they must appeal to this constituency.

The idea of reparations is not new in the US. Following the abolition of slavery, Abraham Lincoln approved an order that promised freed slaves 40 acres of land, but this was later rescinded.

More 2020 presidential nominees backed the idea of addressing the idea of reparations for descendants of slaves during a conference of black activists in New York.

The black power movement of the 1960s and 70s sparked new calls for reparations. And in 2000, a few months before the West Wing episode aired, activist and writer Randall Robinson published *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*, triggering another national debate.

“Reparations was a hot topic then it pretty much disappeared off the radar following 9/11,” says City University of New York professor John Torpey, the author of a book on reparation politics.

That changed in June 2014 when *The Atlantic* published a 16,000 word cover story by Ta-Nehisi Coates titled "The Case for Reparations". The essay went viral and made Coates one of the country's most famous public intellectuals.

"It got people talking about reparations in a way they hadn't for 15 years," Torpey says. Coates previously regarded reparations as “wildly impractical”. He now argued that America’s history of racial injustice - from slavery to Jim Crow to more recent housing discrimination - made them a moral imperative.

He pointed to statistics showing America’s racial wealth gap has been growing, not shrinking, in recent decades. The median black family today owns US\$3,600 - just 2 percent of the \$147,000 of wealth the median white family owns.

Most reparations advocates come from the political left. But the movement gained a surprise supporter last month when conservative *New York Times* columnist David Brooks wrote a column backing reparations. Slavery is America’s “original sin” and direct action needs to be taken to remedy it, Brooks argued.

But there is still no sign that the general public is on board.

A 2016 Marist College poll found that 68 per cent of Americans do not think the US should pay reparations to descendants of slaves. While two-thirds of African Americans supported the idea, 80 per cent of white Americans were opposed.

Even many left-leaning voters are uncomfortable with the idea of handing out cheques on the basis of race. Barack Obama, the country's first black president, did not support reparations; neither did Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders.

There are "better ways" to address inequality than signing cheques, Sanders said recently.

“In a country that is still majority white, it is a much easier sell to advocate policies that address poverty and inequality across the board - not redistributing wealth from one race to another,” Torpey says.

There is also the question of who would qualify. “People ask themselves: does Oprah Winfrey get reparations?” Torpey says. “What about Michael Jordan?”

A reparations program would also be hugely expensive. Darity believes a fair reparations program would cost US\$2.6 trillion, providing about \$80,000 to each black American who can prove they descended from slaves. In the late 1980s the US paid \$20,000 to Japanese Americans who had been held in internment camps during WWII.

Because of the lack of public support for reparations, especially among white Americans, most advocates want to start with a royal commission-style inquiry. It would investigate historic injustices against black Americans and make recommendations to Congress on potential means of compensation.

This truth-telling process, Darity says, could help make reparations a less divisive idea. Every year from 1989 until his retirement in 2017, Democratic congressman John Conyers introduced a bill calling for the creation of a commission to study reparation proposals for African Americans.

Conyers' bill never once made it out of committee, but momentum is building among Democrats in Congress to bring it to the floor for a vote. House speaker Nancy Pelosi says it has her support and longtime reparations sceptic Bernie Sanders this week said he would sign it into law if it comes to his desk as president.