

Will White People Ever Support Reparations?

by

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Somewhere just under the radar of our crisis-driven news cycle, a historic national debate about reparations is heating up. House of Representatives bill HR 40, named after the ill-fated “40-acres-and-a-mule” plan to compensate former slaves, would create a commission to study the reparations question and propose remedies.

This bill has been faithfully introduced in the House every year since 1989. Faithfully but perhaps not always hopefully. Because it has never even made it out of committee. Until now. The full House is expected to approve this study commission by the end of the year.

While this is, undoubtedly, a momentous development, there are still a lot of unknowns. Will the commission determine that reparations are even in order? Will Congress agree? What would an actual reparations proposal look like? And, perhaps most importantly, will white people ever support reparations?

Some of us just assume that white people will never support reparations, because they never have. But that’s not quite true. On more than one occasion governments of the white people, by the white people, and for the white people have rather heartily embraced slavery-related reparations. As long as the money went to, well, white people.

Perhaps the most egregious case involved the country of Haiti. In 1804 Saint Domingue, as it was then known, declared its independence from French colonial rule. For twenty years France refused to recognize Haitian freedom. But then, in 1825, King Charles X sent twelve warships armed with more than 500 cannons to make the Haitian government an offer it literally could not refuse—recognition of their independence for the low, low price of just 150,000,000 francs. That’s ten times what the U.S. paid for the entire Louisiana Purchase!

The stated purpose of the payments was to indemnify former slave owners for the loss of their property. In order to make even the first two of five payments, Haiti had to borrow 30 million francs from French banks. Soon afterward, however, they ran out of money and found themselves in default. So, in 1838, Louise Philippe I sent twelve more warships to deliver a “Treaty of Friendship,” renegotiating the outstanding balance to “just” sixty million francs. Once

again, the outgunned Haitians had no choice but to agree and then take out even more onerous loans from France to cover the cost.

It took Haiti 122 years to pay off those loans, including interest—a financial burden that endured until 1947. If you're wondering why modern-day Haiti always seems to be behind the economic eight ball, consider the long-term impact of the \$21 billion (in 2017 dollars, according to *Forbes* magazine) in reparations this tiny country paid out to their colonial slave masters.

The British, too, had a doozy of a reparations scheme for white people. At least they didn't shake down their former slaves to generate the money, but their even more mammoth compensation went, once again, not to the victims of slavery but to its perpetrators.

When Britain abolished slavery in 1833, the government set aside money to indemnify some 46,000 former slave owners at a total cost £20 million—equivalent to 40% of their annual government expenditure. The BBC has called it the largest state-sponsored payout in British history prior to the 2008 banking crisis. This reparations plan was so enormous that it took 182 years to pay off the £15 million loan used to finance it. In fact, contemporary Brits were still paying for reparations to white slave owners until 2015, when the debt was finally retired.

Even here in America, where reparations have historically been about as popular as mosquitos, we managed to make an exception for a select group of white people. Not in Lincoln's 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, mind you, which neither compensated any slave owners nor liberated any slaves. Since that edict conveniently applied only to those slaves in areas that were "in rebellion against the United States," it was not immediately enforceable. Of course, the U.S. could have abolished slavery in the four slave states that did belong to the Union (Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri), but they are noticeably absent from the Proclamation.

Some eight months earlier, however, Congress passed and Mr. Lincoln signed a far less famous document known as the Compensated Emancipation Act. It targeted only the District of Columbia, where it did, in fact, free the more than 3,100 slaves who lived there. It also compensated their former owners with reparations of up to \$300 per slave, a payout of nearly \$1,000,000 (some \$27 million today).

Perhaps surprisingly, this act provided for up to \$100 to be paid *to the freed slave*. But, not so surprisingly, there was a catch. Kind of a big catch, actually. The recipient had to leave the country. It's unclear how many black people ever took the bait, but probably very few. The idea of solving the "negro problem" by sending former slaves to colonies like Liberia was the darling of its white advocates but never really caught on with its black "beneficiaries."

So, history shows that it is indeed possible to generate white support for reparations—as long the money is going to white people. At some point during the last 150 years, however, we finally figured out that if reparations are going to be paid, they really ought to go to the victims and their heirs. But if the money is going to black people, will white people ever support reparations?

Well, for a long, long time it looked as if the answer was a definitive no. As late as 2002, Gallup found that only 6% of whites were in favor of the government making "cash payments to black

Americans who are descendants of slaves.” Fifteen years later, in a 2017 Washington Post—ABC poll, still only 10% of white people indicated their support for reparations.

But then, in 2019, Gallup saw white support jump to 16%. In 2020, WAPO-ABC registered an 18% approval rate. Most recently, in April, 2021, a UMass Amherst poll conducted by YouGov pegged positive white response at a “whopping” 28%! Due to differences in polling techniques, this latest figure might be a bit exaggerated compared to earlier results, but it nevertheless seems to signal a steepening curve in the direction of white support for reparations.

Granted, the notion of reparations still has far more white detractors than supporters. But, at the very least, this issue has progressed from perennial non-starter status to become a legitimate public policy option. The surge in white approval is also driving an increasing endorsement among the general population. Overall support for reparations rose from 14% in 2002 to 38% in 2021, while opposition dropped from 81% to 62% during the same period. Which may explain how HR40 finally made it out of committee.

What is driving this sudden white openness to reparations? It seems to have far more to do with the continuing barrage of evidence regarding present-day racial discrimination than with a reassessment of our responsibility for the past. And that barrage of evidence shows no signs of abating. But will we become increasingly sensitized to injustice, or is there an empathetic ceiling beyond which we are unwilling to advance?

I don’t know what the future holds, but I do have some idea what’s at stake. First, the future of race relations in America. Because there is no way forward to racial harmony that does not redress the damage done and the disadvantage it continues to impose. But also at stake is the moral legitimacy of this nation. Our collective virtue depends, not on how effectively we each enhance our own wellbeing, but on how selflessly we sacrifice in the pursuit of justice for all.

So, the stakes are high. And there are hopeful signs. But, when push comes to shove, the question remains the same: Will white people ever support reparations? Stay tuned.