Controversial group ADOS divides black Americans in fight for economic equality

American Descendants of Slavery advocates are stirring debate and anger online.

By Samara Lynn
January 19, 2020, 12:08 PM • 14 min read

Reparations and the lingering racial wealth gap have been conversations largely within the black American community. Both issues have received wider attention of late, particularly among the current crop of Democratic presidential candidates.

All the Democratic presidential candidates, except for former Vice President Joe Biden, said they support legislation to at least study the issue of reparations. Only Marianne Williamson, who recently ended her presidential campaign, said she fully supports reparations, in the amount of $200 billion to $500 billion. Biden has not endorsed any reparations legislation.
And reparations and black economics have been addressed at some of the recent Democratic debates.

"I didn’t anticipate that, today, we would be having the most active national conversation about reparations since the Reconstruction Era," said William A. "Sandy" Darity, Jr., Ph.D., an economist and professor of public policy at Duke University’s Sanford School of Public Policy.

The national spotlight on economic injustice is also giving rise to a new wave of online voices looking to disrupt the conversation on race and wealth in America.

These voices are leveraging anger over a racial wealth gap that has persisted over the decades. Average white wealth is seven times that of average black wealth -- a gap that hasn't narrowed since 1962, according to a 2019 study by economists Dionissi Aliprantis and Daniel R. Carroll.

These disruptors are creating conversations online using the hashtag #ADOS -- ADOS stands for "American Descendants of Slavery" -- a movement which some critics fear could drive a wedge between voters in the black community just months ahead of the 2020 election.

The movement, which has gained traction on social media in recent months, has attracted the attention of some academics like Cornel West and politicians like Williamson, who spoke at an event for the group in the fall, though many are loathe to associate themselves with it -- either for or against.

ADOS advocates are adding a whole new layer to the conversation on reparations and economic justice by advocating only for black descendants of slaves and not the black community as a whole.

Their advocacy leaves an entire group of people, American-born descendants of immigrants, some of whose families have been in the U.S. for generations -- many whose families may have survived decades if not centuries of institutional racism -- in limbo in the conversation. And the focus has pitted ADOS adherents against people like journalist Roland Martin, who is descended from Haitian immigrants. It also appears not to address the American descendants of slaves from other countries, including for example Haiti, and whether they should be entitled to reparations.

Disparities exist between the two populations. A 2015 Pew Research report showed that U.S.-born black people were less likely to have a bachelor’s degree than black immigrants -- 19% versus 26%.

The same report also showed that foreign-born black people have a $10,000 higher median income than U.S.-born -- at $33,500.
There are myriad theories and studies on why these gaps exist but the fact that many black immigrants are outpacing black Americans economically and educationally, compounded with the vast racial wealth gap between black and white America, adds fuel to the ADOS movement.

ADOS’ singular focus on black descendants of slavery, and its supporters often combative approach, has sparked controversy and comparisons to a long line of nativist thinking that has gained traction from time to time throughout U.S. history.

There are also concerns from some critical of ADOS that the hashtag is linked to posts spreading disinformation and political division ahead of the presidential election. However, ABC News found no concrete evidence that the ADOS movement is part of the disinformation campaigns that plagued the 2016 election.

**Pushback**

Critics, many of them other black people, have accused ADOS advocates of spewing hateful, xenophobic rhetoric and of online harassment. High-profile black politicians, influencers and journalists, including Kamala Harris, Joy Reid, Jonathan Capehart and others, have been attacked by ADOS accounts for having non-American lineage -- Reid, for instance, has immigrant parents -- or because they have questioned the authenticity of ADOS social media profiles, accusing them of being trolls.

Some have even accused ADOS Twitter accounts of deliberately pushing a far-right narrative under the guise of reparations support.

U.S. intelligence and counterterrorism expert Malcolm Nance, referred to Twitter accounts using “#ADOS” as trolls and posted that they “are a mix of [African American] proTrump racists [and] nuts.”

Yvette Carnell and Antonio Moore are the two most-followed ADOS activists on social media. They have both engaged in heated and controversial exchanges on Twitter and what some might call targeted harassment.
Kamala Harris, the former presidential candidate, is of Indian and Jamaican descent. Carnell has tweeted that she has issues surrounding Harris' solidarity with black people descended from slaves.
When Harris dropped out of the race on Dec. 3, Carnell and other ADOS accounts expressed their satisfaction moments after Harris’ team made the announcement.

Rapper and activist Talib Kweli is an outspoken ADOS critic. While he is also an activist for black economic empowerment and is pro-reparations, he disagrees with ADOS’ rhetoric.

“I don’t think [Carnell and Moore] are being disingenuous about wanting reparations. What I think they are being disingenuous about is the fact that they are clearly anti-black immigrant ... and aligning with the GOP on immigration.”

Kweli said he is also bothered by Carnell’s association with Progressives for Immigration Reform. PFIR is a group with its own critics and has been linked to anti-immigration advocates, some of whom have been accused of xenophobia -- accusations that Kevin Lynn, PFIR’s executive director calls "unfounded." Lynn did confirm to ABC News that Carnell was a PFIR board member until 2019.

Carnell denies his accusations.


Alvin Bernard Tillery, Jr., Ph.D, is an associate professor of political science at Northwestern University. He has written about the issue of reparations and the sources of racial inequality. Tillery began to take notice of ADOS’ web activism over the last two years or so, he said.

While Tillery said that ADOS is not really advocating any new ideas, “they’ve attracted pushback because they have the radical thesis that if there’s going to be reparations for slavery, that it should really only be targeted to persons who are the descendants or legacies of actual American slaves,” said Tillery.

“The reason that we’re having this debate around ADOS ... is because I think this notion that we have as black people is that skin color is tantamount to unity and belonging,” he said.
Darity agrees. "Black American descendants of slavery have a distinctive ethnic identity because of our distinctive origins in the community that was enslaved in the United States," he said. That distinctive identity, he said, is a central premise of ADOS.

Despite the controversy, conversations involving ADOS are happening frequently online. A social listening tool by Brand24, shows that in one recent week, there were over 25,000 conversations across social media including the term "ADOS" with an engagement reach of over 56,000. In addition, Moore said that 2,000 people showed up to attend the ADOS event that he put together with Carnell in Kentucky this past October.

Carnell and Moore said the event was funded by "small donations" from ADOS adherents, help from a local black church, a historically black college, as well as their own funds. It did not have sponsorship, Moore said.

One attendee, Rashaun Phillip Sourles, 36, describes himself as an "ADOS mobilizer."

Sourles is a full-time Uber driver in the Bay Area. He told ABC News he has been struggling financially, and even found himself homeless after a foreclosure on his home. He said the ADOS message of black economic empowerment really resonated with him as he works to upright himself economically and that he will never forget the first time he watched Carnell on YouTube.

"I had been homeless more than a year living 100% out of the same Uber SUV," he said. "I was driving millionaires and billionaires around the Bay Area all day and night."
He said that Carnell “forced a brutally honest reality check about my own Bay Area black life.”

“For God’s sakes, I’m ... an educated man with an impeccable CV, and yet here I am, sleeping in the back of an Uber SUV somebody else owns,” he said.

**ADOS’ insertion in the 2020 elections**

ADOS is also intent on sending a controversial message during the 2020 elections, which it pushed during the October conference -- proposing a strategy of voting down-ballot Democrat unless the Democratic nominee advances what Moore calls a "black agenda" -- a tactic that at least one Pew Research study suggests helped affect the outcome in 2016, and the election of Republican President Donald Trump.

And it’s a move that runs counter to Democrat-led efforts to protect voters’ rights, particularly of historically disenfranchised groups like Black Americans. House Democrats recently passed legislation that would shore up voting rights and reduce gerrymandering. The bill is not expected to pass the Republican-controlled Senate.

In addition to reparations, ADOS proponents want one “designation on the Census with ADOS and another for Black immigrants” and “ADOS hiring and employment data” to be gathered “for all businesses receiving tax credits, incentives, and governmental support,” along with other demands, according to the website ADOS101.com run by Carnell and Moore.

ADOS is of course, not the first to address reparations or black economic empowerment. For 30 years, the late Detroit Congressman John Conyers repeatedly introduced the HR 40 bill for lawmakers to set up a commission to study the issue of reparations. The legislation has yet to pass, and the mantle for getting reparation law passed has been picked up by
Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee and by New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker, who dropped out of the Democratic primary race this month.

Moore and other ADOS advocates have refused to support these bills because they say the proposals aren’t enough. “It is being used as cover to avoid a discussion of real reparations for ADOS,” Moore told ABC News and offers "no commitment to funding,” he added.

**Determining who is entitled to what**

Moore also insists that ADOS' vision of a black economic agenda will benefit all black people, not just ADOS.

"Many of the black agenda items will benefit black people that aren't ADOS; [those] at [historically black colleges and universities] or living in black communities. But still, as to reparations, we use the criteria ... you must suffer both the cost of slavery and Jim Crow through your black lineage to receive reparations," he said.

He said it would be "relatively easy" to determine who is ADOS and who isn't. "Few if any voluntary black immigrants outside of students were in the United States prior to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965," he said. Reparations would "exclude black immigrant populations that voluntarily migrated to America."

Ultimately, the question of who is entitled to what and the issue of "black American politics of unity," and some of the issues ADOS is highlighting, are ones that black people will have to ask themselves, said Tillery.

These are in fact, issues that all Americans will need to think about as talk of reparations and narrowing the racial wealth gap become even more mainstream in American political conversation and into the 2020 elections.

*Editor's note: Updated to clarify ADOS' proposed voting strategy.*
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