

How Reparations for Slavery Became a 2020 Campaign Issue

In 1865, formerly enslaved people were promised 40 acres of land and, later, a mule. More than 150 years since then some politicians are trying to make good on a version of that promise.

By **Emma Goldberg**

Published June 18, 2020 Updated June 21, 2020

When Shaniyat Chowdhury, a Democratic candidate for Congress in New York, was asked about the most urgent concern facing his district, his options were not in short supply. He could have said housing or hunger. Healthcare was certainly on the table. But when prompted in a local news interview to name what he intends to do about his “single most pressing issue,” the 28-year-old democratic socialist had this answer: reparations, to address centuries of racial injustice.

Mr. Chowdhury was raised in public housing in South Jamaica, Queens. His father waited tables and his mother cleaned hotel rooms. His parents immigrated from Bangladesh, but growing up he noticed that many neighbors who lived like him, in poverty, were black.

He remembers the fifth grade teacher who taught him about slavery, the “original sin” of the country his own family came to seeking economic opportunity. Two decades later, he is running for Congress to reckon with that history.

“It’s about more than a check,” he said in a recent interview. “It’s about improving the quality of life for black Americans. It’s about addressing the sins of this nation over 400 years.”

For some scholars who have studied reparations for decades, that’s a remarkable sentiment to hear from a congressional candidate, even one running in a deep-blue Queens district.

Representative John Conyers, who died in 2019, was a long-serving Democrat from Michigan and a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus. He introduced a bill on the study of reparations every year beginning in 1989 and said he would “do so until it’s passed into law.” (He did, until he resigned in 2017.) For years, the prospect of the bill

becoming law seemed quite distant. Gallup polling has shown that more than two-thirds of Americans oppose reparations. President Barack Obama said in 2016 that he considered the idea impractical.

Slowly, though, the notion has gained political traction. Sheila Jackson Lee, the Democratic congresswoman from Texas, reintroduced Mr. Conyers's bill that would establish a commission to study the impact of slavery and make recommendations for its "apology and compensation" in 2019, and Senator Cory Booker, Democrat of New Jersey, introduced companion legislation in the Senate. Last year on Juneteenth, an annual holiday commemorating the ending of slavery, a subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee held a first-of-its-kind hearing on reparations.

"This is a nation that has gone through slavery, Reconstruction, lynching, Jim Crowism," Ms. Jackson Lee said Thursday. "We're in a new era. We have the hearts and minds of the American people. That's why I think reparations will pass."

But few political candidates have featured the issue front and center in their campaigns. "It was somewhat of a verboten topic for political figures in the past," said William Darity, a public policy professor at Duke University and author of "From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century." "There's been a real fear that there could be a political penalty from the white electorate from any intimation that you might seriously consider it."

In the past year, that attitude appears to have shifted: "It's striking to me that people campaigning to be elected officials are mentioning the word at all," Mr. Darity said. "There seems to be a sea change."

Candidates around the country have found the idea of reparations to be a powerful way of engaging young progressive voters. Charles Booker, the state legislator running in the Democratic primary to challenge Mitch McConnell for Senate in Kentucky, mentions reparations on his campaign website, noting his own family's history of lynching and enslavement. Jamaal Bowman, running in the Democratic primary against congressman Eliot Engel in New York, has said that he believes in reparations, citing author Ta-Nehisi Coates's testimony at last year's congressional hearing.

While the political push has long come from veteran black lawmakers, white candidates are discussing the issue of reparations too. At a recent Senate primary debate between Senator Ed Markey and Representative Joe Kennedy, both the Massachusetts Democrats said they were open to the idea. Mr. Kennedy said in an interview that the conversation should "go beyond debate over a study" of the issue, where the legislative focus has remained for decades.

Andrew Romanoff, a Democratic candidate for Senate in Colorado, announced that he supports reparations for both Native and black Americans during a recent primary debate. Mr. Romanoff started his career working at the Southern Poverty Law Center, and later led an undercover investigation on employment discrimination for a state civil rights agency. He has made racial justice a central part of his policy platform.

“Like other big ideas, reparations is one arriving more swiftly to the realm of the possible,” he said. “For a long time it was stuck in a debate over the mechanics and the money. How much would it cost? The first step is to recognize the moral obligation.”

The mechanics are no doubt fiercely debated; reparations has been used to describe a variety of proposals, though at its heart refers to financial compensation from the government to the descendants of enslaved people. Mr. Romanoff, and many others, looks to the precedent set by Germany in paying reparations to victims of the Holocaust when arguing for the plausibility of a similar effort in the United States.

Mr. Romanoff said he has heard voters describe reparations as “too extreme” or “too far left.” But he views its polling popularity as “beside the point” and said he sees his campaign as an opportunity to educate voters about the feasibility of ideas that may seem politically unpalatable.

“If you agree it’s the right thing to do, then the fact that it may not poll well isn’t a concern,” Mr. Romanoff said. “Consensus doesn’t magically materialize, it has to be forged.”

Some polls indicate that current conditions may be ripe for forging consensus on issues that long seemed beyond the sphere of political possibility. In the two weeks after the killing of George Floyd, public support for the Black Lives Matter movement increased almost as much as it had in the preceding two years. The idea of defunding or abolishing the police, which was for years relegated primarily to the realm of a hashtag, has inched closer to reality in Minneapolis, where a veto-proof majority of the City Council has pledged to disband its police department.

And the country has now seen both a public health crisis and an economic crisis that disproportionately hurt black Americans. “Whenever we have an economic shock, you see black people have a harder time recovering because of historical discrimination connected to the wealth gap,” said Andre Perry, a Brookings Institution fellow and a co-author of a recent report on reparations. “Now you see how easily we found money to give out when white people were suffering because of Covid and you scratch your head.”

Practicality is not the only impediment mentioned. A nationwide poll conducted last year found that while a majority of black Americans favor reparations, they think of the proposal as less helpful than other progressive policies such as a higher minimum wage and stronger

anti-discrimination laws.

The country's first systematic attempt to offer a form of reparations for slavery came when Union General William T. Sherman issued an order, in 1865, promising 40 acres of land, and later a mule, to former slaves. The idea originated in a conversation the general and War Secretary Edwin Stanton held with 20 leaders of the black community in Savannah, Ga. But Andrew Johnson, President Lincoln's successor, overturned the order months later. (The name of the house reparations bill, H.R. 40, is a reference to those promised 40 acres.)

"With 40 acres and a mule, what slaves were asking for was the ability to become functioning members of society, by working," said Royce West, a Texas state senator who is running in a Democratic primary for U.S. Senate. At a recent debate he said he leans in favor of reparations; his opponent, M.J. Hegar, did not go that far, saying she would want to study the issue further. "That particular promise was never kept by government because the politics did away with it," he added.

More than a century and a half later, Mr. West is hopeful that the politics constraining that unfulfilled promise have changed. "Right now you have corporate America throwing money at the problem," he said, referring to the million of dollars poured into racial justice organizations in recent weeks. "The question is how will that money be spent."

It's not just corporations — hundreds of thousands of Americans have taken to the streets marching for racial justice in recent weeks. Amid the unrest, some candidates have found the idea of reparations to be a powerful way of engaging young progressive voters. Mr. Darity said younger Americans also seem to view reparations more favorably than older generations; polling in 2016 showed that nearly 4 out of 5 baby boomers tend to oppose the idea, while more than half of millennials say they are either in favor or unsure.

"Young people across races are very excited about it," said Mr. Bowman, one of the Democratic congressional candidates in New York who has made reparations part of his pitch.

"Voters have been telling me this is long past due. For a very long time we've talked about the study of the need for reparations, but the data is already available," he added, citing low health, education and economic outcomes for black Americans.

And one more data point: The Black Lives Matter rallies he has attended in predominantly white neighborhoods, and with large, diverse crowds, have made him think that what once seemed to so many as a political impossibility could be closer to reality.

A Juneteenth observance.