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## PolitiFact: Protests renew call for reparations for African Americans

By Amy Sherman

9-11 minutes

The latest outpouring of anger and frustration about centuries of systemic racism has renewed calls for reparations for African Americans.

House Democrats have introduced bills since 1989 to develop proposals for reparations. But those efforts languished.

Now, supporters of reparations are optimistic about new awareness since the nationwide protests over the death of George Floyd.

"This right now is the most attention we've ever had in American history on the issue," said Justin Hansford, a Howard University law professor.

The goal of reparations is to acknowledge the nation's history of white supremacy, the legacy of slavery and their continuing impact on African Americans in all aspects of society, said Kristen Clarke, president of the National Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law.

In Congress, legislation to establish a commission to study reparations is on the table:

- The 2019 [House bill](#) sponsored by Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Texas, has the support of 128 Democrats, slightly more than half the party's caucus.
- Jackson Lee and Rep. Karen Bass, D-Calif., the head of the Congressional Black Caucus, have both [predicted it will receive a vote this year](#), and [House Speaker Nancy Pelosi](#) announced her support early in 2019.
- The [Senate counterpart](#), sponsored by Cory Booker, D-N.J., picked up two co-sponsors in June: [Tim Kaine](#) of Virginia and Sherrod Brown of Ohio, who [spoke favorably about reparations last year](#). The bills have no Republican co-sponsors.



Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Texas, sponsored a 2019 bill that has the support of 128 Democrats.

The legislation calls for a major study of reparations, but anticipates that if enacted, reparations would likely include a formal apology for America's history of slavery, as well as compensation to descendants of slaves.

William Darity Jr., a professor of public policy and African American studies at Duke University, [testified](#) before a House committee in June 2019 about reparations.

"The protests galvanized by George Floyd's murder have activated a discussion of many measures to promote racial justice including reparations for black American descendants of U.S. slavery," Darity told PolitiFact.

### Historical efforts to make reparations

The first federal call for reparations came during the waning months of the Civil War. Union Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman ordered that formerly enslaved families should get plots of 40 acres along with mules.

But after President Abraham Lincoln's assassination, President Andrew Johnson reversed Sherman's order. The phrase "40 acres and a mule" would later become a symbol of the nation's unfulfilled promise.

Over the next century, many activists called for reparations, including [Callie House](#), [Marcus Garvey](#) and [Malcolm X](#).

In 1989, Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich., introduced [a bill to create a commission to study reparations](#). The bill called for the commission to recommend remedies and consider whether compensation was warranted. The idea for reparations drew more attention following author [Ta-Nehisi Coates'](#) 2014 essay in [the Atlantic](#).

After Conyers retired in 2017, [Jackson Lee took over the effort](#). [House Resolution 40](#) lays out the case for reparations, saying that some 4 million Africans and their descendants were enslaved from the time of the American colonies until the end of the Civil War in 1865, and that discrimination continued in various forms for generations.

After slavery ended, the bill says, the government perpetuated practices that disadvantaged African Americans, including "sharecropping, convict leasing, Jim Crow, redlining, unequal education, and disproportionate treatment at the hands of the criminal justice system."

As a result, the bill says, African Americans "continue to suffer debilitating economic, educational, and health hardships," including higher unemployment and less wealth than whites.

## Bill would set up a commission to consider remedies

If the bill is enacted, a commission comprising 13 members would be appointed within 90 days.

The president and House speaker would each appoint three members, with the Senate president pro tempore appointing another. The other six members would be selected by organizations that have historically championed reparations.

The major questions the commission would pursue center on the history of American slavery, the government's role in discrimination and a redress for past injustices. The commission would hold hearings, gather documents and bring on experts to create a report.

This process would culminate with the commission recommending "appropriate remedies" as part of a report to Congress due within a year, the bill states. H.R. 40 would authorize \$12 million to set up the study commission. It's silent as to how any reparations would be financed.

## Increased calls for reparations amid the protests in 2020

A series of events this year have fueled demands that Congress take steps to address racism, including the death of Floyd, the COVID-19 pandemic and the death of [Breonna Taylor](#), an African American woman who was shot in her home while Louisville police executed a search warrant.

In June, Robert Johnson, who became [America's first billionaire](#) when he sold BET to Viacom, called for [\\$14 trillion in reparations](#) based on \$357,000 for each of 40 million African Americans.

"Now is the time to go big," to keep America from dividing into two separate and unequal societies, Johnson said on [CNBC](#).

"Wealth transfer is exactly what's needed," he argued. "Think about this. For 200-plus years or so of slavery, labor taken with no compensation is a wealth transfer. Denial of access to education, which is a primary driver of accumulation of income and wealth, is a wealth transfer."

There are [historical precedents](#) for reparations, including in Germany for victims of the Holocaust and in the United States for Japanese Americans who were interned in World War II, noted Duke University professor William Darity and his co-author, writer A. Kirsten Mullen, in a June [report](#) calling for reparations to individuals.

The writers called for reparations in the form of money to eliminate the black-white wealth gap, which they called "the most glaring indicator of racial injustice in America."

While many proposals for reparations are focused on payments to individuals, another way to achieve reparations would be to provide money to black institutions including universities, churches and hospitals serving black communities.

## Impact on the presidential race in 2020

Former Vice President Joe Biden's [campaign plan for black America](#) calls for a study on reparations, but he hasn't committed to supporting monetary reparations.

During an [NAACP town hall](#) in June, moderator Ed Gordon asked Biden about that: "If in fact a calculation comes to you that you are satisfied with, would you then say, 'I am for reparations?'"

Biden replied that it "depends upon what it was, and will it include Native Americans as well."

The White House did not respond to our question about Trump's position on reparations. (The campaign deferred to the White House.) But in June 2019, after a House hearing on reparations, [the Hill asked Trump](#) for his opinion.

"It's been a very interesting debate," Trump said. "I don't see it happening, no."

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell also rejected the idea in 2019.

"I don't think reparations for something that happened 150 years ago for whom none (of) us currently living are responsible is a good idea," [McConnell said](#). "We've tried to deal with our original sin of slavery by fighting a civil war, by passing landmark civil rights legislation. We elected an African American president."

[Polls in 2019](#) showed that a majority of Americans oppose reparations, including most white Americans, while a majority of African Americans supported the idea.

Discussion of reparations has come up in every Democratic presidential race since 2008. In that year, candidate Barack Obama opposed reparations, arguing that the best way to amend for the past was to focus on the present and future, including school funding.

In 2016, Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., and Hillary Clinton called for improving education, providing jobs and addressing poverty in lieu of reparations.

But during the 2020 primary, [many of the candidates](#) called for studying reparations, including Sens. Kamala Harris and Elizabeth Warren, two of Biden's potential vice presidential picks.

Booker, one of the 2020 presidential candidates, filed a reparations bill in the Senate in April 2019, and Harris signed on as a [co-sponsor in May 2019](#), along with Sens. Warren, Sanders and Amy Klobuchar.

Harris told [NPR](#) shortly before Booker's bill was filed, "I think that the term 'reparations' means different things to different people. But what I mean by it is that we need to study the effects of generations of discrimination and institutional racism and determine what can be done, in terms of intervention, to correct course."

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