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POLITICS

Reparations to Black Americans for Slavery Gain New Attention

The House looks to approve for the first time a commission to study compensating for slavery and longtime discrimination



Demonstrators took part in a Juneteenth march and rally in Washington, D.C., on June 19. Juneteenth marks the end of slavery in the U.S.

PHOTO: OLIVIER DOULIERY/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By Jacob M. Schlesinger

Updated July 26, 2020 4:23 pm ET

Weeks of racial-justice protests are pushing the concept of reparations for Black Americans from the political margins toward the center of the national debate, with policy makers from Capitol Hill to city halls weighing compensation plans for slavery and longtime discrimination.

In Washington, House leaders say they expect to pass this year for the first time a three-decade-old proposal creating a federal commission to craft an official government apology and remedy plan. Former Vice President Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, has endorsed the bill, the first major party leader to do so since Congress initially took it up in 1989.

The legislation faces opposition from Republicans who control the Senate. President Trump last year told a reporter “I don’t see it happening.” So the measure is unlikely to become law this year. A Democratic sweep in November elections, however, could pave the way for enactment.

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A formal commission would only study the issue. Adopting a concrete national compensation plan faces long odds, with polls showing white voters still strongly opposed. Supporters remain divided over whom to compensate, how to do it and what is being compensated for.

The reparations debate is a symbol of how far Americans have moved since the late-May killing of George Floyd in their willingness to re-examine persisting racial discrimination in everything from law enforcement and wealth to health care and education.



Louisville, Ky., Mayor Greg Fischer speaking to a group gathered for a vigil in memory of Breonna Taylor on June 6.

PHOTO: BRETT CARLSEN/GETTY IMAGES

“Before, when you talked about reparations, people would roll their eyes,” says Louisville, Ky., Mayor Greg Fischer, a recent convert on the issue, whose city has been rocked by protests over the March police killing there of Breonna Taylor. “Now it’s more ‘tell me how that can get done.’ ” As the new president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, he steered the group last month to endorse the federal reparations bill, with support from Democratic and Republican members.

The California Assembly passed a bill, now before the state Senate, creating its own version of a reparations study commission. The city council of mostly white Asheville, N.C., this month voted to apologize for slavery and offer funding to help Black homeowners and businesses, following a similar measure last year in Evanston, Ill. The American Civil Liberties Union, long silent on the issue, has made it a top legislative priority.

Surveys show big increases in the number of Americans who believe that Black people face discrimination and who support the Black Lives Matter movement, including changes such as overhauling policing and removing Confederate monuments.

Beyond that, multiple surveys taken in the past month show that large majorities still say they oppose reparations. A Washington Post/ABC News poll conducted July 12-15 found 63% of those questioned said they opposed payments “as compensation for...slavery.” While 82% of Black respondents were in favor, just 18% of whites were.

“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,” Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) said as the debate was escalating last year. He said the Civil War, civil rights legislation and the election of Barack Obama as the first Black president were sufficient responses to “our original sin of slavery.”

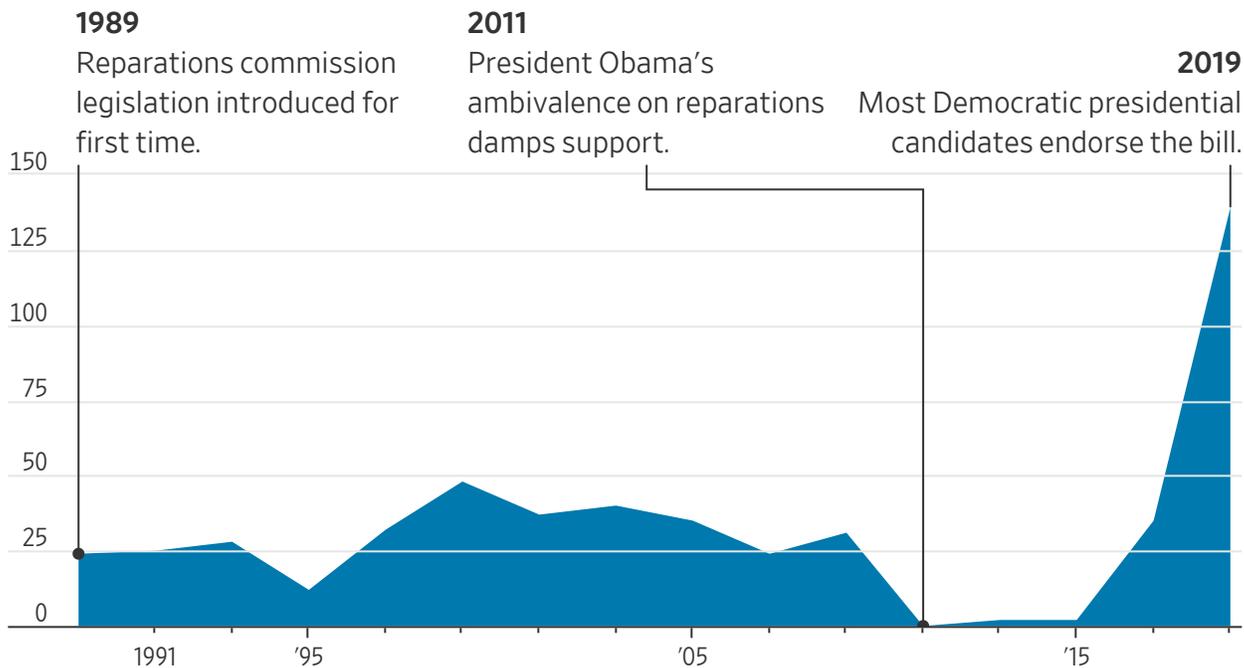
“We’re making really important steps, but it hasn’t cracked open yet,” says Melina Abdullah, professor of Pan-African Studies at California State University, Los Angeles, and a co-founder of Black Lives Matter in the city. “We’d probably get a majority of white Americans to say ‘chattel slavery was wrong and we apologize.’ But reparations is something tangible, and that still gets hemming and hawing.”

Lawmakers in congressional swing districts remain nervous about the issue. Of the 43 House Democrats who captured GOP-held seats in 2018, just four have co-sponsored the reparations bill. None of the four Black freshmen in those districts has done so.

Slavery Reparations

Support is rising in Congress for legislation creating a commission studying reparations to Black Americans for slavery and discrimination, raising prospects for House passage this year.

Number of co-sponsors for House reparations legislation



* As of July 21

Source: Congress.gov

Some white supporters of the federal reparations commission say they are ambivalent about taking action beyond a study. “It’s great to be thinking about it,” says Virginia Democratic Rep. Don Beyer, a co-sponsor of the bill. “But I don’t think the commission commits itself to reparations in the final analysis.”

Most advocates say reparations should include an official federal apology, not just for slavery but for the long period of government-sanctioned discrimination that followed, and that many say persists to this day. Most also say it should include some form of monetary remedy, but consensus frays there.



Some supporters believe reparations should include federal checks to individuals. Robert L. Johnson, founder of Black Entertainment Television and the first Black American billionaire, recently issued a \$14 trillion reparations framework that would give 40 million Black Americans direct payments of about \$350,000 each—spread out over a decade or longer. He estimates the sum would close the wealth gap between the average Black and white households.

Mr. Johnson believes compensation should be limited to those who can trace their lineage to slaves. That would exclude about six million Black Americans whose families, or who themselves, came to the U.S. post-Civil War.

Duke University economist William A. **Darity** Jr., a leading reparations scholar, agrees. He says slavery descendants have the strongest claim on compensation, due to the government's broken promise to compensate freed slaves at the end of the Civil War.

Mr. **Darity's** book "From Here to Equality" published this spring argues that the federal government must belatedly fulfill that pledge. It also reviews the wide range of other reparations options floated over the years, such as one to tax companies proven to have benefited from slave labor—akin to "superfund" cleanup sites paid for by polluters.

Mr. **Darity** says the fact that the congressional legislation doesn't commit to limiting reparations to slavery descendants, among other reasons, has prompted him to oppose the measure in its current form.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Do you support reparations to Black Americans for slavery and discrimination, and if so, what should they be? Join the conversation below.

That position conflicts with leading advocates like the National African American Reparations Commission, an organization launched in 2015 that has worked closely with lawmakers to help shape the bill.

“To say the only people eligible have to prove it with some DNA testing is ridiculous on the face of it,” says Ron Daniels, a founder of the group and a longtime advocate who promoted reparations in his third-party 1992 presidential campaign. He says most Black Americans have suffered from the legacy of slavery and discrimination, and they deserve benefits.

Some see reparations as taking the form of greater federal spending in Black communities, to improve school systems, health care and the like. “When you start talking about reparations in terms of monetary issues, then you lose me, because nobody can put a value on...the loss of these freedoms,” South Carolina Rep. James Clyburn, the third-ranking Democrat in the House, said in a recent radio interview.

A supporter of the reparations commission, the Black lawmaker says that “a better way to deal with what reparations is supposed to be about” is his legislation earmarking 10% of the federal budget for communities with persistently high poverty rates.

The modern reparations movement emerged in the 1980s, as Congress approved an apology and compensation plan for Japanese-Americans interned during World War II. The year after President Reagan signed that measure in 1988, Michigan Democratic Rep. John Conyers introduced legislation seeking similar redress for Black Americans, and reintroduced it every congressional session until his 2017 resignation. The proposal languished most of that time. Some activists say ambivalence toward reparations from Mr. Obama, the first Black president, damped support.



Texas Democratic Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, right, speaking during a 2019 House subcommittee hearing on her bill to create a commission studying reparations for Black Americans.

PHOTO: PABLO MARTINEZ MONSIVAIS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The issue gained traction a few years ago, amid the growing influence of Black Lives Matter. While the group has mainly advocated for police reforms, an alliance of activists affiliated with the movement also adopted reparations as a core plank in its policy platform in 2016. When Texas Democratic Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee picked up the mantle from Mr. Conyers to reintroduce his bill in 2019, it quickly drew support from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D., Calif.) and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D., N.Y.).

The pandemic has given further momentum. Beyond the disproportionate health and economic impact of the coronavirus on communities of color, the multi-trillion-dollar relief packages passed swiftly by Congress have shifted the terms of the debate over what is feasible for spending programs for distressed Americans.

“If you can write a \$2 trillion check to small business suffering from a pandemic, you can damn sure have a conversation about reparations,” says Ron Busby Sr., president of U.S. Black Chambers Inc., a Black business advocacy group. “It’s on the table now. It’s a real conversation.”

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