



# The Great Awakening

*A hidden shift is revolutionizing American racial politics — and could transform the future of the Democratic Party.*

*by Matthew Yglesias — April 1, 2019*

For all the attention paid to the politics of the far right in the Trump era, the biggest shift in American politics is happening somewhere else entirely.

In the past five years, white liberals have moved so far to the left on questions of race and racism that they are now, on these issues, to the left of even the typical black voter.

This change amounts to a “Great Awakening” — comparable in some ways to the enormous religious foment in the white North in the years before the American Civil War. It began roughly with the 2014 protests in Ferguson, Missouri, when activists took advantage of ubiquitous digital video and routine use of social media to expose a national audience in a visceral way to what otherwise might have been a routine local news story.

“If there had been no Twitter or Facebook,” Columbia University’s John McWhorter, an early and somewhat skeptical observer of the Awakening, tells me, “Trayvon [Martin] and Mike Brown would have had about as much impact on white thought as, say, Amadou Diallo did.”



During protests after the death of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, marchers hold a banner listing the names of people killed by law enforcement since 1990. *Orjan F. Ellingvag/Corbis via Getty Images*

Pollsters began to see a rapid, sustained change. White Democrats suddenly started expressing dramatically higher levels of concern about racial inequality and discrimination, while showing greater enthusiasm for racial diversity and immigration. (While political disputes around race are often found under the same umbrella as gender and sexual orientation, where attitudes are also shifting, the relatively recent, relatively sudden change that constitutes the Great Awakening is fundamentally about race and its relationship to national identity.)

There's also a certain paradox to the Awakening. As white liberals became more vocal about racial inequality, more racially conservative Democrats left the party and helped power Donald Trump's electoral victory. This backlash gives the impression that there's a surging tide of white racism in America.

But just as slavery was not new during the pre-Civil War period, there's absolutely nothing new about white racism as a force in American politics. Jenée Desmond-Harris wrote in 2016 that Trump was "refreshing" not just "to people who share his views" but "to people who have always known that views like this exist."

Trump has made white racial resentment more visible than it was before, but at the same time, white liberals have become much more attuned to racism — seeing more of it not necessarily because the world has changed but because their own attitudes toward longstanding features of it have changed.



Students at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, protest to draw attention to police abuse on December 1, 2014. *Scott Olson/Getty Images*

The exact implications of this for short-term electoral politics are dicey — older, more rural, less educated whites who are relatively untouched by the Awakening exert disproportionate influence in the political system. But the fundamental reality is that the Awakening has inspired a large minority of white Americans to begin regarding systemic racial discrimination as a fundamental problem in American life — opening up the prospects of sweeping policy change when the newly invigorated anti-racist coalition does come to power.

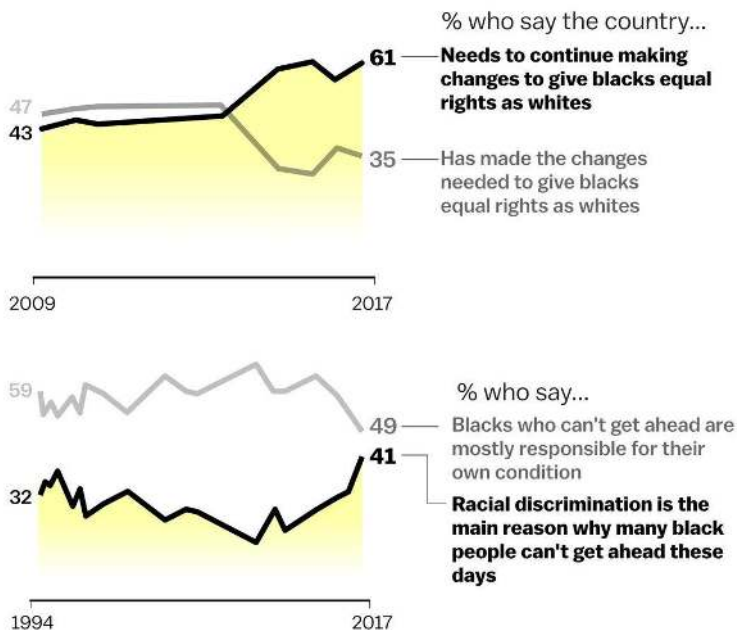
## **Public opinion on race is shifting**

While opinion on LGBTQ issues has been evolving in a broad, steady manner for years, the shift on racial thinking that constitutes the Great Awakening is of more recent vintage. Trump's presidency itself is probably a driver of this, since there is a tendency well-known to political scientists for public opinion to move in the opposite direction of the person who occupies the White House.

The change, however, appears to predate Trump and, in fact, to have relatively little to do with the calendar of presidential politics. Instead, polling from the Pew Center shows that as late as 2014, most Americans believed there was no longer any need for the country to make changes to address black-white inequality. Consequently, few people believed discrimination was the main barrier to black upward mobility. These numbers then started to change rapidly, with the shift driven overwhelmingly by a change in the views of self-identified Democrats.



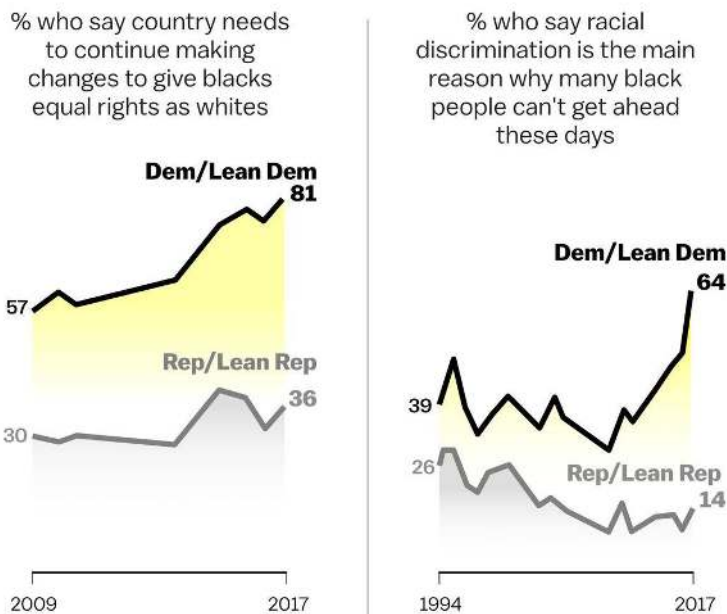
## Majority says country needs to continue making changes for racial equality



Source: Pew Research Center

Vox

## Racial equality views are different among parties



Source: Pew Research Center

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The timing of this change suggests that the Ferguson protests were a key flashpoint in changing thinking about the discrimination issue. But Brian Schaffner, a Tufts University political scientist, says the beginnings of the shift were visible even during Barack Obama's first term.

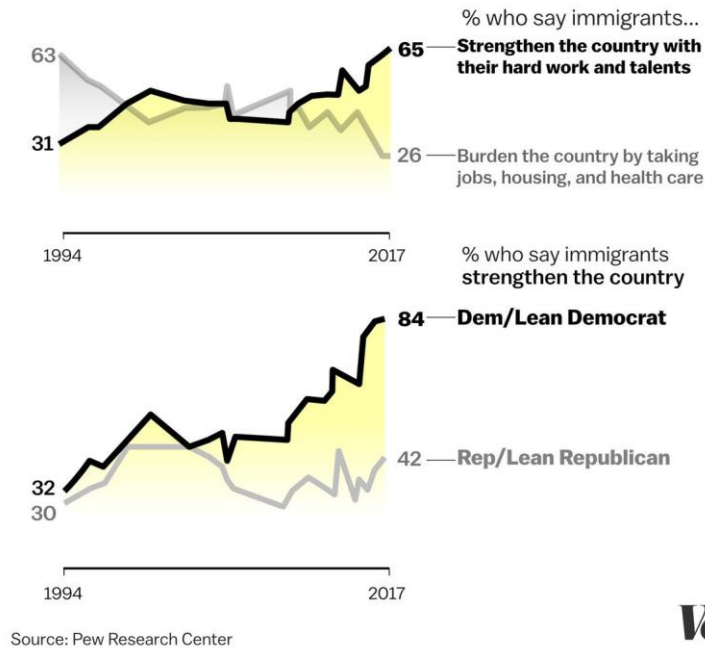
"I don't think it's just a reaction to events," Schaffner says. Rather, "even prior to Ferguson, people take cues from elites," and Democratic elites were beginning to signal to the rank and file that they should take systemic racism concerns more seriously.

Obama's 2012 observation that "if I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon" is just one small example of how elite actors have helped push a shift in whites' perception of race. And the shift, once underway, became mutually reinforcing. Liberal white audiences became increasingly interested in black intellectuals' conceptions of race and racism in America. Back in April 2015, the social justice group Race Forward produced a series of videos starring Jay Smooth trying to explain the concept of "systemic racism" to a mass audience. Hillary Clinton used the term in a February 2016 speech.

Trump, of course, responded to this with his own racial discourse bringing white identity politics into play in a more explicit way than had been seen in a generation or two. But that evolution was two-sided.

Schaffner observes that "Clinton talked a lot more about racial justice issues during the 2016 campaign than Obama did during his campaigns" — further priming the minority of white Americans who supported her to adopt a more sweeping view of racial justice. Key to this view, as Adam Serwer wrote in the Atlantic in November 2017, is that we should see racism as a question of "institutional and political power" rather than being "about name-calling or rudeness."

## More Americans say immigrants strengthen US, especially Democrats



The extent to which that model has become mainstream among Democratic Party leaders is now evident. Just this March, Beto O'Rourke told an overwhelmingly white audience in Iowa that American capitalism is "racist." The previous summer, Elizabeth Warren called the criminal justice system "racist." Even Joe Biden — who in the mid-1970s was a leading political opponent of aggressive school integration measures — in a January 2019 speech called on white America "to admit there's still a systemic racism" in American life. Mainstream Democratic Party politicians, in other words, are beginning to take for granted that their constituents will embrace the more institutional understanding of racism.

At roughly the same time, there has been a large increase in the number of Americans who express positive attitudes about immigration — driven almost entirely by shifting views of Democrats. The sheer scale of this change is far too large to have been caused by the much-discussed rising Latino share of the electorate.

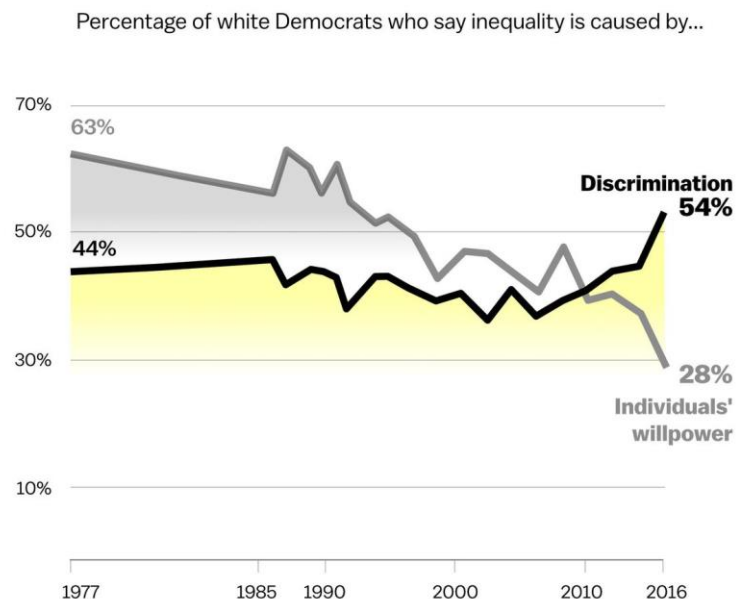
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## White Democrats have become much more racially liberal

The biggest change in attitudes on race has been most pronounced among white Democrats. Opinion leaders often miss the scale and recency of these changes because progressive elites have espoused racial liberalism for a long time. Sean McElwee, of the left-wing policy organization Data for Progress, did an analysis of General Social Survey data, which shows that throughout the 1980s, '90s, and 2000s, most white Democrats thought African Americans' lack of individual initiative was the main source of racial inequality in America.

The notion that Obama's ascension to the presidency would usher in a "post-racial" era of American life, of course, proved false. And not just because of a white backlash to his administration or to the growing diversity of the American population, but because white Democrats dramatically shifted their views of the centrality of racial discrimination in American life *after* the election of a black man to the highest office in the land.

## Democrats changed their views on the causes of inequality



Source: The New York Times. General Social Survey

Some of this is a compositional effect. As Obama pushed racially conservative whites out of the Democratic Party, the remaining Democrats are more racially liberal. But using Voter Study Group data, McElwee is able to show that people who consistently self-identified as Democrats changed their views between 2011 and 2016.

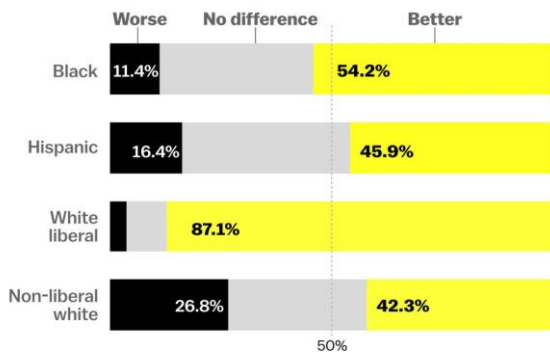
Zach Goldberg, a doctoral candidate at Georgia State University, observes that on key measures of racial attitudes, white liberals' opinion has moved to the left of where black and Latino opinions are. White liberals are now *less* likely than African Americans to say that black people should be able to get ahead without any special help.

White liberals also have warmer feelings about immigrants than Hispanics do.

And, critically, white liberals are much more enthusiastic about the idea that diversity makes the United States a better place to live than are blacks or Latinos. Non-liberal whites are least enthusiastic of all, which is not enormously surprising, but Latino views of this are closer to those of non-liberal whites than to white liberals.

### Liberal whites are more enthusiastic about diversity

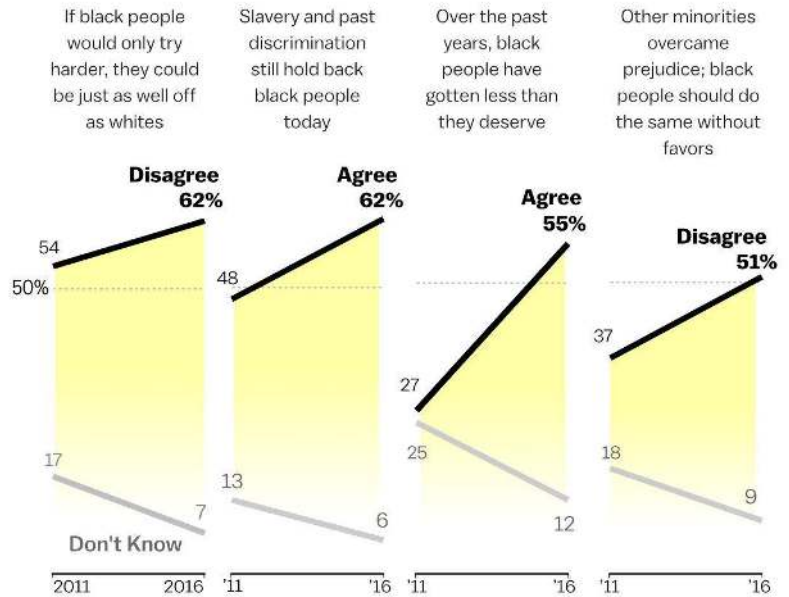
"On balance, do you think having an increasing number of people of many different races, ethnic groups, and nationalities in the US makes this country a better place to live, a worse place to live, or does it make no difference?"



Source: ANES 2018 Pilot Survey

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### Democrats have become more liberal on race questions

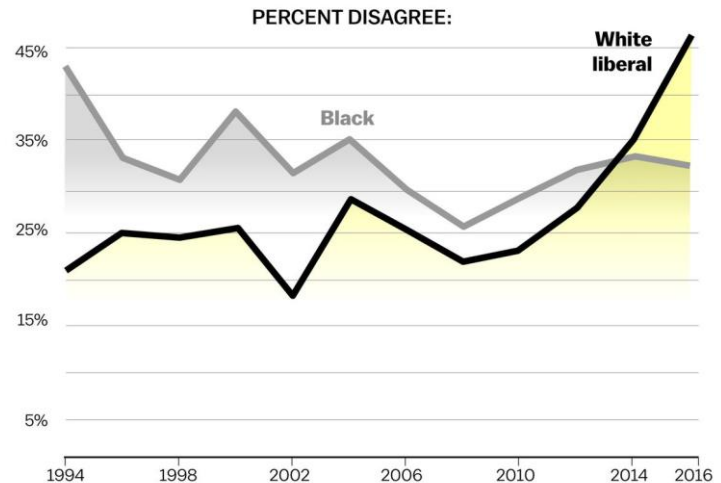


Source: New York Times, Voter Study Group

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### White liberals' opinion has moved to the left of black Americans

"Irish, Italians, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up: blacks should do the same without special favors"



Source: General Social Survey

Vox

At the same time, between 2001 and 2018, the share of Democrats who describe themselves as liberal in Gallup polls has risen from 30 percent to 50 percent. The upshot is that white liberals — a group whose views on race



are generally to the left of nonwhites — are now about 40 percent of the overall Democratic Party, making them the largest bloc in the party and the critical driver of Democratic politicians’ leftward shift on race and identity issues.

## The Awakening has driven big platform shifts

Back in 1996, the Democratic Party platform read like something out of a Trump campaign ad. “In 1992, our borders might as well not have existed,” the document states. “Drugs flowed freely. Illegal immigration was rampant. Criminal immigrants, deported after committing crimes in America, returned the very next day to commit crimes again.” Bill Clinton went on to run for reelection boasting about his crackdown at the border.

Even by 2008, when Democrats substantively supported a path to citizenship for unauthorized immigrants, the platform was still framed around enforcement-first themes, intoning that “we cannot continue to allow people to enter the United States undetected, undocumented, and unchecked.”

On criminal justice, the 2008 platform led with a promise to be “tough on violent crime,” while by 2016, it opened by committing the party to “ending mass incarceration” and explicitly denounced the war on drugs while calling out “the discriminatory treatment of African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and American Indians.”



President Bill Clinton attends a campaign rally in Santa Barbara, California, during his reelection bid on November 1, 1996. *David Hume Kennerly/Getty Images*



Demonstrators from three separate immigrants' rights marches converge near City Hall on May 1, 2008, in Los Angeles. *David McNew/Getty Images*

Perhaps the clearest sign of the shift, however, is the completely upturned politics of reparations. Ten years ago, reparations were a total nonstarter in Democratic Party circles. Instead, someone like Rush Limbaugh would try to secure political advantage by characterizing Obama administration economic policies as a form of reparations. Ta-Nehisi Coates's 2014 article making the case for reparations was obviously enormously influential on the specifics of that question, but also more broadly in the larger Awakening — such that references to redlining and other discriminatory aspects of the post-World War II real estate market are now commonplace throughout progressive circles.

Coates said that “initially I was very surprised” by the size of the white audience for his work — an audience whose existence is both a cause and a consequence of the Awakening — but he's palpably changed the conversation. Now it's Democrats themselves who embrace the term even when their actual policy proposal is race-blind. Kamala Harris, for example, mentioned her LIFT Act, which would boost incomes throughout the bottom 60 percent of the income distribution, as a form of “reparations” even though most of the beneficiaries would not be black.

The leftward shifts on immigration, criminal justice, and reparations are often described as reflecting the electoral clout of nonwhite voters. But while that is surely part of the story, the underlying demographics simply haven't changed rapidly enough to account for the pace of the change. The key difference is that white liberals have changed their minds very rapidly, thus altering the political space in which Democratic Party politicians operate.



## **Racial realignment keeps reshaping politics**

Ever since the 2016 election, analysts have been stuck in a tedious argument between the observation that racial resentment was a key predictor of which voters flipped to Trump's camp and those who prefer to ascribe Trump's ascension to some form of "economic anxiety."

After all, say the racial resentment skeptics, the Obama-to-Trump flippers were, by definition, willing to vote for Barack Obama — so how racist could they possibly be? A key point to understanding this is that "racial resentment," as used by political scientists, is a term of art that largely measures political views rather than any kind of interpersonal animosity.

One traditional factor that goes into the racial resentment mix, for example, is the General Social Survey question that asks whether you agree or disagree with the statement "Irish, Italians, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up; blacks should do the same without special favors."

This is, in fact, a very revealing query in terms of your understanding of the history of race and ethnicity in the United States. About a third of African Americans disagree with it, which is more than the share of the overall white public but substantially less than the 45 percent of white liberals who say they disagree.

A big part of what Trump did in the 2016 campaign was simply increase the salience of racial conflict themes, thus boosting his appeal to white voters who may have previously backed Democrats on other grounds. But it's crucial to understand that, in large part because of the Awakening, Trump is not to blame: Democrats themselves have moved the goalposts in terms of what kind of racial views one is expected to affirm as a good liberal.

The growing racial liberalism of rank-and-file white Democrats now has party leaders talking about "systemic racism" and sending strong signals to the party's base about what kinds of attitudes are appropriate for Democrats to hold.

## **The irony of the Great Awakening**

One of the signature consequences of the Great Awakening is the sense that Trump is a uniquely loathsome figure in American politics.

To the extent that white liberals now see racism as an enormous looming challenge for the country in a way they did not in the relatively recent past, Trump is very much the personification of that challenge. And thus, given the perfect enemy, it's perhaps not surprising that much of the newly woke attitude is, in crucial respects, a bit vague in its precise policy implications. Everyone is talking about reparations and "institutional racism," but nobody has a precise policy program for tackling either of those things. Congress passed the prison reform bill, the First Step Act, but there's little consensus on what the next step is.

But it's clear that getting rid of Trump is a key part of the story, and a key argument in the 2020 primary is over who is best suited to do that — a flashback candidate like Biden, someone like Harris or O'Rourke who's more evocative of the future, or a leftist like Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren.

And yet to the extent that one believes — as, in fact, the evidence seems to say — that racial polarization of the electorate was a boon to Trump's fortunes, it seems plausible that Democrats' new post-Awakening political style will only help him win. But since anti-racism really is a central motivating force for the anti-Trump coalition, it hardly seems realistic or reasonable to expect it to hide that fact.

Social upheavals simply do not abide by the dictates of partisan politics. The increased moral fervor unleashed by the Great Awakening of the 1840s and 1850s broke the Whig Party and temporarily entrenched the South's hold on political power. But abolitionist sentiment carried the day in the end. And by the same token, while the Great Awakening might drive some Democrats into Trump's arms now, the sustained phenomenon is forcing the Democratic Party to confront the legacy of America's racial caste system squarely. The next Democratic president will have to do the same.



People in Union Square rally on April 29, 2015, in solidarity with demonstrators in Baltimore after the death of Freddie Gray. *Eduardo Munoz Alvarez/AFP/Getty Images*

<https://www.vox.com/2019/3/22/18259865/great-awakening-white-liberals-race-polling-trump-2020>