

The Washington Post

Once a hot topic among Democratic candidates, reparations has gotten little attention in the lead-up to the South Carolina primary

Eugene Scott

February 27, 2020

The weekend's South Carolina primary marks the first time an electorate made up of a large number of black voters will cast ballots in the 2020 primary. But that state's Democrats probably won't have at the top of their mind a topic that initially attracted quite a bit of attention during this campaign cycle, but has since fallen by the wayside: reparations.

Sandy Darity, a public policy professor at Duke University, said Wednesday in a Washington Post Live panel I moderated that any serious conversation about closing the racial wealth gap has to consider a reparations program benefiting the descendants of black people enslaved in America.

"One of the critical things that we have to recognize is the magnitude of the racial wealth gap," Darity said. "If you were to examine the American population as a whole, black Americans are about 13 percent but possess less than 3 percent of the nation's wealth."

Darity's words came the day after the CBS presidential debate, where despite the candidates competing for the support of South Carolina's black voters, many of whom descend from slaves, there was relatively little talk about the role of reparations in addressing income inequality. Tom Steyer, the candidate and hedge fund manager, was asked how he would convince black voters that he had the best solutions to the economic challenges, including the income gap between black men and white men and higher unemployment rates, facing black Americans. Steyer replied:

Every single policy area in the United States has a gigantic subtext of race. We're talking about education. We're talking about criminal justice. We're talking about housing. We're talking about loans. I started a bank to basically correct the injustice in the financial services industry. Basically, to make loans to black-owned, Latino-owned, and women-owned businesses. We've supported over 8,000 affordable housing units.

But more than that, I believe I'm the only person on this stage who believes in reparations for slavery.

Something happened. We should have a formal commission on race to retell the story of the last 400-plus years in America of African-Americans, of systematic legal injustice, discrimination, and cruelty, but also of 400-plus years of contribution in terms of building the United States of America and leading the United States of America from a moral standpoint.

When Biden was given the opportunity to answer the question, the former vice president to America's first black president talked about investing in black entrepreneurs, tax credits for first-time home buyers and tackling gentrification.

But Biden, the candidate leading with black voters, didn't mention reparations. Neither did Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), the front-runner based on his performance in the first three states. And the debate moved on.

Biden has been criticized by proponents of reparations for dodging the issue or replying in a manner some consider tone-deaf. Author Anand Giridharadas, who is supporting Sanders, said Biden answering a question about the legacy of slavery in the September debate by discussing the inadequacies of black parents was "disqualifying."

Sanders opposed reparations in 2016, and when "The View's" Sunny Hostin asked him about it in March, he dismissed the idea.

"I think that right now, our job is to address the crises facing the American people and our communities, and I think there are better ways to do that than just writing out a check," he said. Sanders has suggested that "10-20-30," a race-neutral poverty alleviation program proposed by House Majority Whip James E. Clyburn (D-S.C.), could be a type of reparations. But Clyburn, who endorsed Biden on Wednesday, has long been critical of the reparations conversation. And critics say that his program would not primarily benefit the families of those enslaved. According to a Post analysis, only 18 percent of the 460 counties that would be eligible for the program are majority black. Nearly 60 percent are majority white.

Ron Daniels, convener of the National African American Reparations Commission, is working with Democrats in Congress on a bill to study reparations. About Clyburn's program, Daniels told The Post's Tracy Jan: "I think it's good, unifying public policy. It's not reparations."

Early in the 2020 Democratic primary campaign, conversations about reparations had some on the left hopeful that the party's eventual candidate would seriously engage with this issue.

Former housing secretary Julián Castro, Sen. Cory Booker (D-N.J.), Sen. Kamala D. Harris (D-Calif.) and even Sanders, in the spring, all expressed support for a measure creating a commission to study the issue. Most of the remaining candidates also support studying it. But it's no longer a primary focus on the campaign trail.

"It is interesting to me that under our Constitution and otherwise, that we compensate people if we take their property," Castro said a year ago this month. "Shouldn't we compensate people if they were property sanctioned by the state?"

While the conversation about the best way to address the racial gap is likely to continue as candidates move on to other states with diverse populations, the chance that reparations will be a primary focus grows dimmer. Despite initial interest in the topic from former candidates and some within the left's base, there isn't any recent polling showing high levels of support for the issue. Besides, convincing voters outside of the Democratic Party to support the idea could be a challenge.

Ryan Bourne, an economist at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, spoke at Wednesday's Post Live event about the connection between slavery and the present-day racial wealth gap.

"I don't think anybody could deny that, in part at least, that is a result of historic issues of slavery and racism," he told me. "I think looking at the scale of those numbers, it's impossible to come to any other conclusion. But the real question is then: 'What to do about it?' Because politically, I know this is a very difficult issue."