



Racist Backlash: Why The Election Of A Black President Was A Threat To 200 Years Of Legal White Nationalism

Thom Hartmann

August 5, 2022

America today is in the midst of our second attempt at creating a truly pluralistic, multiracial democracy. The GOP is doing everything they can to sabotage the effort: can we pull it off despite their treachery?

“A Southern Poverty Law Center poll from April found nearly 70 percent of Republican voters believe in the Great Replacement Theory, and the Cato Institute finds that more than 7 in 10 Trump supporters think that “discrimination against Whites has become as big a problem as discrimination against Blacks and other minorities.” The GOP has led on the White racist CRT-social panic, with Republican legislatures in at least 24 states successfully passing anti-CRT measures.” – Kali Holloway

Racism is now the single most powerful force in the Republican Party, and the tipping point was the election in 2008 of America’s first Black president.

Republicans on the Supreme Court, the White Supremacist GOP base, and a broad and well-funded international campaign to replace liberal democracies around the world with racial ethnostates are all working to block efforts to make our Founding promise available to all Americans.

It is a cliché to note that the American ideal of “all men are created equal” really meant all White men, but clichés are clichés because they’re usually grounded in self-evident truths. While America was founded on radical and egalitarian democratic principles, almost all of the Founders were quite clear that equality and the right to self-governance were strictly limited to one racial group.

That changed for the first time in American history immediately following the Civil War: we tried a multiracial democracy for about 12 years during a period referred to as Reconstruction.

But when over 1500 African American men achieved elective office during that 1866-1876 decade — over 600 of them in state legislatures and 17 in the US House and Senate — White backlash ripped across the nation.

It was so intense it led straight to the “compromise” of 1877, giving the White House to Rutherford B. Hayes, who lost both the popular and the Electoral College vote, ending the entire multiracial democracy experiment, and legally relegating Black Americans back to second-class status.

Lincoln was long dead when the Supreme Court nailed White Supremacy back into law in 1896 with their Plessy v Ferguson “separate but equal doctrine,” blocking African Americans from holding any meaningful elective or appointed office or judicial positions.

This rigid racial hierarchy only started to crack again a century after Reconstruction, in the 1960s, after the Brown v Board decision overturned Plessy and LBJ pushed through the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act.

Those two laws, along with ending racial immigration quotas in 1965, saw the steady “browning” of our population and a dramatic increase in Black and Hispanic participation in our elections.

At that time, in the late 20th century, White racists across the country — although uneasy about the state of affairs — were still largely relegated to the Klan- and militia-type fringes of society. Until America elected her first Black president in 2008.

Much like the massive and widespread White backlash to Reconstruction over a century earlier, a new generation of White racists moved from simply muttering about Black people to sonic-boom levels of freak-out.

New York real estate grifter Donald Trump led the charge that year, asserting that this bright, charming, Black new president couldn’t possibly be a real or “natural born” American who got to the White House on his own: his presidency had to be an international plot by Kenyan and international socialists (including Jews led by George Soros) to install a Black fifth column in American government.

With a huge assist from Fox “News” and rightwing hate radio, Trump’s 2008 “Birther” grift moved from the fringes into the mainstream of the Republican Party, galvanizing around Obama’s effort to provide affordable or free health insurance to all Americans, including Black people.

Former slave states still under the control of White racists had, up until then, successfully resisted implementing LBJ’s Medicaid program for low-income working people and the poor.

As I detail in *The Hidden History of American Healthcare: Why Sickness Bankrupts You and Makes Others Insanely Rich*, their racism was so deep they were willing to consign their own poor White people to disease and death, so long as Medicaid’s free healthcare was also out of reach for the Black people in their states.

Obamacare would have extended Medicaid to every state in the union, including giving every Black person in the country free or low-cost access to healthcare regardless of income, a situation the White racists who control the GOP, their White billionaire funders, and the White base that keeps them in power declared intolerable.

“Tea Party” groups, funded by White Supremacist billionaires, popped up in state after state and were given breathless wall-to-wall media coverage by a then-almost-entirely-White press.

In 2012, in the case of *NFIB v. Sibelius*, five Republicans on the Supreme Court stepped into the act, declaring that former slave states that wanted to continue to deprive their citizens of medical services were perfectly within their right to do so.

To this day 12 mostly former slave states, with America’s largest Black populations, continue to withhold federal Medicaid funds and services from their working poor: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

The Obama years also saw an explosion of White Supremacist militia activity and associated gun sales. Starting in 2016, when Trump encouraged the Oathkeepers to act as election monitors across the nation, the entire GOP began a warm and official embrace of these racist militia groups, the 21st century version of the Klan.

Republican members of Congress and high-profile figures associated with the MAGA movement began using White Supremacist militias as security.

Here in Oregon the statewide Republican Party voted to officially “utilize volunteers from the Oregon Three Percenters, Oath Keepers, and other security groups” to intimidate protesters at their events, as did Michigan Republican leaders.

Multiple Republican members of Congress, most famously Marjorie Taylor Greene, now routinely use White Supremacist militias to provide security for their events.

In this exploitation of racism to gain and hold political power, the GOP is following the examples of Russia’s Putin and Hungary’s Orbán, who both proudly describe their nations as White ethnostates.

Maintaining White rule in America got a massive boost in 2013 when five Republicans on the Supreme Court gutted the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which had been re-ratified by a 98-0 vote in 2005.

Racism has ended in America, Chief Justice John Roberts cynically proclaimed in his decision, so it is no longer necessary to restrain White racists’ behavior in former slave states. His proof was the election of Barack Obama to the White House.

When the Voting Rights Act came up for re-ratification last year, every single Republican in the House and Senate voted against it, in sharp contrast to 2005 when every Republican in the Senate voted “Yes.”

They also voted as a block against the We The People Act which would have expanded the Voting Rights Act’s protections.

This is how radically the GOP changed after that singular event of a Black man stepping foot into the White House. Now they’re looking to overseas ethnostates for inspiration.

White supremacists like Tucker Carlson have repeatedly praised and defended Putin’s White nationalism and even broadcast their shows from White Supremacist Hungary, openly endorsing white control and claiming a plot by Democrats to “replace” White people.

The simple reason White voters still cling to Trump, after all his lies and scandals, is his open racism; the reason they’re willing to go with DeSantis as an alternative is because he’s also proven his racist chops with his anti-CRT laws, book bans, and attacks on “BLM.”

The GOP has, since Obama’s election in 2008, become a racist anti-democratic insurgency rather than a pluralistic and legitimate political party. Under the lie of “voter fraud” they’re now criminalizing both voting and registering voters in the states they control.

With big money from rightwing billionaires and corporations, and the support of an explicitly White Supremacist media machine, just by May of last year Republicans had passed 34 laws in 18 states restricting the right of citizens to vote. This year 229 new laws have been introduced in 33 states to limit minorities’ right and ability to vote.

As Ki Lerner wrote for the *Iowa Capitol Dispatch*, Republicans are trying to terrify potential Black voters with a threat of prison:

“In total, states enacted more than 60 new felonies and more than 50 new misdemeanors [all related to voting].

“The new offenses, made law in dozens of voting bills, range from low-level misdemeanors to felonies punishable by up to 20 years in prison.”

Foreign governments run along White Supremacist lines are getting into the act, too, since the Supreme Court legalized foreign election interference with their 2010 Citizens United decision.

The Russian propaganda and influence campaign directed at the GOP has worked: Republicans in Congress are now, in increasing numbers, voting and speaking out in favor of White Supremacists Putin and Orbán and against American aid to Ukraine and other nations and programs that support multiracial democracy around the world.

Before 2008, Republicans were willing to work with (and work around) democracy but avoided trash-talking it or letting foreign autocrats influence American domestic politics. Nixon, Reagan, and Bush all took the White House under highly dubious circumstances, but still generally supported democracy and the elections that underpin it, both here and abroad.

No high-profile Republican was willing to tear apart Americans' confidence in our democracy by claiming a president was illegitimate or won a election through criminal action — until a Black man, Barack Obama, got elected to the presidency and triggered their racist frenzy.

Today there is a worldwide movement toward race-based autocracy (aka fascism) with which the GOP has aligned itself. From Hungary to Russia to China, in each case, governments openly maintain and elevate the status and power of racial majorities while crushing racial minorities.

That was also true of our entirely-White-run nation until, in the 1960s, we chose to again try multiracial and multiethnic democracy; that second American experiment, a second Reconstruction if you will, is now under direct assault by the White Supremacists who have taken over every level of the GOP.

The modern Republican assault on our post-1965 pluralistic democracy began when Blacks in America “got too much power” — specifically, the election of Barack Obama as president in 2008 — just as happened in the 1870s when large numbers of African Americans achieved elective office, provoking the White backlash that ended the first Reconstruction.

Today's backlash is also aided and promoted by rightwing billionaires and giant corporations who recognize the core racism of the GOP base but continue to pander to it to retain their fat tax cuts and the deregulation of their industries.

These White billionaires like the status quo given them by 42 years of Reaganomics; as Senator Bernie Sanders noted Friday on my program:

Today three White men own as much wealth as the bottom 50 percent of Americans; the top 1% has more wealth than the bottom 92 percent; and three Wall Street firms own assets worth more than the entire GDP of our nation.

Racism's damage to democracy in this country — facilitated by Republicans on the Supreme Court and now openly pushed by Republicans in Congress — has succeeded in tearing our nation apart while producing legislative paralysis.

It is going to take a generation or more to finally cut out this cancer of racism, but if enough Americans stay awake and politically active it still is possible. It is going to require massive citizen engagement and voter mobilization to produce that peaceful multiracial revolution, but it's possible.

The last time we tried, in the 1870s, we failed at achieving our founding goal of all Americans being “created equal.” Racism froze our semi-democratic republic in place for the following century.

Now we’re in America’s second era of Reconstruction, an new attempt to reinvent our country in line with the ideals expressed in our founding documents.

This time, as more and more White Americans awaken to the damage the poison of racism has done all these 240+ years, it’s possible we can pull it off. For the first time in our nation’s history, as many non-White children are entering elementary school as White ones.

We have a hell of a big job ahead of us, but a new and fully multiracial generation, the Zoomers, is stepping up toward leadership. Let’s hope, pray, and work to help them make it happen.